

UPCOMING ELECTIONS IN THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE: IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

HEARING BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES ONE HUNDRED FIFTEENTH CONGRESS

SECOND SESSION

JANUARY 10, 2018

Serial No. 115-105

Printed for the use of the Committee on Foreign Affairs



Available via the World Wide Web: <http://www.foreignaffairs.house.gov/> or
<http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/>

U.S. GOVERNMENT PUBLISHING OFFICE

28-179PDF

WASHINGTON : 2018

For sale by the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Publishing Office
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UPCOMING ELECTIONS IN THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE: IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 10, 2018

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:00 p.m., in room 2172, Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Paul Cook (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Mr. COOK. A quorum being present, the subcommittee will come to order. And I would like to now recognize myself for an opening statement.

I would like to begin this first subcommittee hearing of the Second Session, 115th Congress, by extending a warm welcome to our returning members on the subcommittee. I am especially grateful for our ranking member, to the left of me here, and especially the bipartisan nature of this subcommittee. And I am excited to work together with each of you this year to conduct oversight and then craft policy to advance U.S. interest in the Western Hemisphere.

I also look forward to working with the Trump administration to advance the national security strategy in the days ahead, especially as it relates to addressing the many challenges facing Latin America and the Caribbean. This is an exciting year for regions, 12 elections—oh my God—12 elections will take place in 9 countries, including Presidential elections in Costa Rica, Paraguay, Colombia, Mexico, Brazil and Venezuela. Raul Castro has also announced he will step down as official leader in Cuba. Although, the next steps remain unclear. Each of these events will test the state of democratic institutions, freedom and rule of law in the region. And we must never take these principles for granted.

Approximately 350 million voters across Latin America and the Caribbean will have the opportunity to elect new leaders and affect the political trajectory of many countries this year.

It is about the size of your district. Isn't it?

The stakes are high for the citizens, as well as for U.S. interests in the region. Job and economic growth depend on strong democratic institutions, mutually beneficial bilateral relationships, and secure conditions that welcome business investments. However, the security situation remains tenuous throughout the region as trans-

national criminal networks operate with impunity. And illicit activities, including drug trafficking, continue affecting our country.

Further, unresponsive governments in an endless sea of corruption scandals have eroded public trust in traditional democratic institutions and in leaders who do it not face accountability for their actions. Consequently, many countries are facing an apathetic electorate ahead of their elections. A recent poll by Vanderbilt found the lowest support for democracy among citizens in the region since 2004. Fewer than 55 percent of Mexicans and Brazilians believe Democracy is the best political system. A little scary.

Such views diverge sharply from what the United States and other freedom-minded countries in the region agreed to in 2001 with the adoption of the Inter-America Democratic Charter, which states that representative democracy is indispensable for the stability, peace, and development of the region.

The ability for citizens to have access to credible information about candidates and platforms, to vote freely and fairly without interference, and to have confidence that public institutions remain accessible and transparent when considering election results is vital to the success of democracy. Likewise, international electoral observation missions play a critical role in providing impartial verification of election results and strengthening confidence in democratic institutions. I applaud Brazil, Mexico, Costa Rica, and Paraguay for welcoming OAS observation missions and encourage all the countries holding elections this year to allow for robust international and domestic observations in their elections. In addition, these elections have the potential to alter the political trajectory of the region and impact U.S. security and economic interests.

Brazil's elections could affect critical economic reforms. Colombia's elections may influence the fate of the peace deal and the country's approach to reducing coca production. And Mexico's elections might impact its historic energy reforms and the approach to the country's ongoing security issues.

We also continue to deal with the challenges from regimes in our hemisphere as Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro has moved to disqualify the country's main opposition parties from participating in Presidential elections. And Cuba continues to deprive the Cuban people of any form of free and fair elections ahead of Raul Castro's anticipated handover of power later this—well, it is close to New Year's. Regardless of whatever challenges these countries may be facing, the United States and other democratic countries in the region have a role to play in supporting democracy and the citizens' ability to choose their leaders freely.

I look forward to hearing from our distinguished panel of experts whom each has personal experience promoting democracy, increasing government accountability and transparency, and strengthening the capacity of democratic actors throughout the region.

With that, I turn to my ranking member for—or our ranking member—actually, it is your ranking member—a very good friend of mine who is a great asset to the committee and a good friend. So I recognize him.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Cook follows:]

Chairman Paul Cook
Opening Statement
Foreign Affairs Committee's Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere
"Upcoming Elections in the Western Hemisphere: Implications for U.S. Policy"
Wednesday, January 10th in Rayburn Room 2172

I would like to begin this first Subcommittee hearing of the Second Session of the 115th Congress by extending a warm welcome to returning Members on the Subcommittee. I am especially grateful for Ranking Member Albio Sires and the bipartisan nature of this Subcommittee, and I am excited to work together with each of you this year to conduct oversight and craft policy to advance U.S. interests in the Western Hemisphere. I also look forward to working with the Trump Administration to advance the new National Security Strategy in the days ahead, especially as it relates to addressing the many challenges facing Latin America and the Caribbean. This is an exciting year for the region: 12 elections will take place in nine countries, including presidential elections in Costa Rica, Paraguay, Colombia, Mexico, Brazil, and Venezuela. Raul Castro has also announced he will step down as official leader in Cuba, although the next steps remain unclear.

Each of these events will test the state of democratic institutions, freedom, and rule of law in the region, and we must never take these principles for granted. Approximately 350 million voters across Latin American and the Caribbean will have an opportunity to elect new leaders and affect the political trajectory of many countries this year. The stakes are high for these citizens as well as for U.S. interests in the region. Jobs and economic growth depend on strong democratic institutions, mutually-beneficial bilateral relationships, and secure conditions that welcome business investments. However, the security situation remains tenuous throughout the region, as transnational criminal networks operate with impunity and illicit activities, including drug

trafficking, continue affecting our country. Further, unresponsive governments and an endless sea of corruption scandals have eroded public trust in traditional democratic institutions and in leaders who do not face accountability for their actions. Consequently, many countries are facing an apathetic electorate ahead of their elections. A recent poll by Vanderbilt University found the lowest support for democracy among citizens in the region since 2004. Fewer than 55 percent of Mexicans and Brazilians believe democracy is the best political system.

Such views diverge sharply from what the United States and other freedom-minded countries in the region agreed to in 2001 with the adoption of the Inter-American Democratic Charter, which states that “representative democracy is indispensable for the stability, peace, and development of the region.” The ability for citizens to have access to credible information about candidates and platforms, to vote freely and fairly without interference, and to have confidence that public institutions remain accessible and transparent when considering election results is vital to the success of democracy. Likewise, international electoral observation missions play a critical role in providing impartial verification of election results and strengthening confidence in democratic institutions. I applaud Brazil, Mexico, Costa Rica, and Paraguay for welcoming OAS observation missions and encourage all the countries holding elections this year to allow for robust international and domestic observations of their elections.

In addition, these elections have the potential to alter the political trajectory of the region and impact U.S. security and economic interests. Brazil’s elections could affect critical economic reforms; Colombia’s elections may influence the fate of the peace deal and the country’s approach to reducing coca production; and Mexico’s elections might impact its historic energy reforms and the approach to the country’s ongoing security issues. We also continue to deal with challenges from the authoritarian regimes in our hemisphere, as Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro has

moved to disqualify the country's main opposition parties from participating in presidential elections, and Cuba continues to deprive the Cuban people of any form of free and fair elections ahead of Raul Castro's anticipated handover of power later this year. Regardless of whatever challenges these countries may be facing, the United States and other democratic countries in the region have a role to play in supporting democracy and citizens' ability to choose their leaders freely. I look forward to hearing from our distinguished panel of experts who each has personal experience promoting democracy, increasing government accountability and transparency, and strengthening the capacity of democratic actors throughout the region. With that, I turn to Ranking Member Sires for his opening remarks.

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Mr. SIREs. Good afternoon everyone and Happy New Year. Thank you to our witnesses for being here today. And thank you to our chairman for holding this important hearing. I look forward to working in 2018 with the chairman and continue the bipartisan approach that we have had here for many, many years.

You know, an important and timely hearing is taking place to look at the upcoming elections throughout the region in 2018. There are many elections slated for this calendar year in some of the most consequential countries in the Western Hemisphere. Some of the United States' largest trading partners and strongest allies will see new Presidents in the coming year. And I hope we can continue to build on our partnerships with the incoming administration.

Unfortunately, some countries, like Cuba and Venezuela, have elections in name only. The authoritarian grips of Castro and Maduro over the people is absolute, and they refuse to allow the will of the people to be heard. It is critical that we do everything we can to ensure that, in each and every election, the will of the people is heard, and elections are conducted peacefully, safely, and freely. Free and fair elections create trust between the population and the government for the most transparency in government functions and can allow a country to thrive. Hampering these efforts can bring instability, violence, corruption, and economic decline to populations, while elites thrive at the expense of everyone else.

The past year has shown that the entire region is grappling with a fight against corruption. No matter where a candidate is on the political spectrum, they have been asked by the voters how they plan on rooting out corruption, reducing crime, improving economic stability and regaining the trust of the general public. The U.S. does not have a favorite candidate or outcome. We only want to ensure that democracy is upheld throughout the region so that people's human rights are respected and we, as a hemisphere, can continue to thrive. It is my hope that we can learn today from our witnesses what more can be done both by the U.S. Government and countries around the region to strengthen institutions throughout the region to ensure that elections are conducted freely, fairly, and peacefully. Thank you.

Mr. COOK. Thank you, Congressman Sires.

Now I am going to turn to our distinguished member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you so much, Chairman Cook.

Thank you to our Ranking Member Sires for holding this important and timely hearing. With the Western Hemisphere set to see many key Presidential, parliamentary, and municipal elections this year, as you have pointed out, Mr. Chairman, that will have far-reaching implications, this is an opportunity to examine the landscape, to see how elections may impact the region and our own interest.

And, sadly, one place we know we won't see elections, as the chairman and the ranking member have pointed out, is in my native homeland of Cuba. The Cuban people continue to be denied the right to choose their own leaders. The system in Cuba is a farce. The President is selected by the National Assembly, and the National Assembly, oh, that is selected by the regime in what can only

be described as a vicious circle of corruption. Raul Castro claims that he will step down and allow a transition of power in April. He has already pushed that back once.

The reality is, even if the so-called transition happens, the balance of power will remain with Raul Castro for as long as he wants it, and the people of Cuba will continue to suffer. The U.S. must not give Castro any concessions until we see the regime meet basic conditions, like the release of all political prisoners and prisoners of conscience. The people must be allowed to exercise the fundamental and basic human rights like freedom of speech, freedom of expression, and to have free, fair, and transparent elections that are monitored by international observers.

And then, of course, we have Castro's protege in Venezuela: Maduro. Venezuela is set to hold sham elections sometime in December, but with Maduro in power, little is expected. Even if elections are held, we know that it will be a fraudulent process—they all have been—just as the municipal elections were last year. The people of Venezuela have been pleading for a new democratically elected government. In 2015, when the opposition won in the National Assembly, what did Maduro do? He stripped it of any legislative power. Now Maduro's grip on the Supreme Court and the Supreme Electoral Tribunal make it impossible for the voice of the people to be heard at the polls. When the people protest, they face beatings, arrests, and even death.

The administration has taken action against Maduro regime officials, but there is so much more that we can do. There is a severe food and medicine shortage in Venezuela as a result of Maduro's failed and oppressive policies, and that is why Ranking Member Eliot Engel and I introduced, and the House passed last month, the Venezuela Humanitarian Assistance and Defense of Democratic Governance Act. Our bill mandates a strategy from our agency, USAID, to provide humanitarian aid to the people of Venezuela. And the bill also aims to fight widespread corruption among Venezuela Government officials and I hope that our colleagues in the Senate will take action and pass this measure so that we can help those who are in urgent need.

This year, we will also see important elections in Brazil. With public opinion, as you pointed out, Mr. Chairman, at an all-time low, increasing public debt, high-profile corruption allegations reaching the highest levels in Brazil, the country is at a crossroads and faces a critical election. At the center of the corruption scandal is the Odebrecht case. Not only has it implicated Brazil's politicians, but it has also implicated high-profile business executives. Unfortunately, the Odebrecht corruption is not limited to just Brazil. It has incriminated more than half of the countries in Latin America and many current heads of state. It is shocking.

In December 2016, our Department of Justice reached a plea agreement with Odebrecht for at least \$3.5 billion of global penalties to resolve charges of bribery and what has amounted to be the largest case of its kind in history. And what I want the Department of Justice to do is to name the officials who are implicated in this because many of those officials will be standing for elections. And the people will not know that those people they are vot-

ing for, those have been subject to bribery, not just allegations, but factual cases of bribery.

And I will end with Colombia. Colombia is at a pivotal point in the aftermath of agreement between the government and the terror group FARC. Colombia still has a ways to go, but it is often overlooked, and it is a critical one. We have so many national security interests.

Thank you, Chairman Cook. Thank you, Ranking Member Sires, for holding this important hearing. Thank you.

Mr. COOK. Thank you, Congresswoman.

With that, I am going to turn to our member from New York, Congressman Meeks, for an opening statement.

Mr. MEEKS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Ranking Member Sires.

So much of the analysis I have been reading on the Western Hemisphere lately conveys concerns about democratic backsliding. The tendency to view developments that way is understanding in the context of increased visibility of corruption in the region and the persistence of violence and inequality. But we contend with all of this at a time when most Latin Americans will be in a position to cast a vote this year in highly consequential elections. As someone who has been actively engaged in trying to support and advance collective hemispheric interests, I don't see a region with democracy at risk. Rather, I see a region with democracies that are being tested and compelled by citizens of various nations. And in the process, they are maturing and being fortified.

We have moved beyond the extreme political volatility and vulnerabilities of the 1980s. Latin American democracies have shown that they have staying power, with tools such as stronger judiciaries and increased visibility through the press and technology. Economic reforms have strengthened economies. And so much so that citizens now, more than ever, are in or entering the middle class and the mainstream. They are using their voices and purchasing power to demand transparency and accountability in their governments. Americans know, perhaps more than any other citizenry, that democracy is all evolving and must never be taken for granted. We could not look at the rise of populism and anti-establishment sentiment in Latin America and see the trend as democracy faltering unless we are willing to say the same about our own country.

On the contrary, those same trends in the electorate here in America and throughout the hemisphere can be viewed as an opportunity to make sure we never neglect democratic institutions, which is absolutely key.

I am glad to see that we have NDI represented here today. And I can recall working closely with Mr. Swigert and his NDI colleagues in Colombia on strengthening democratic institutions, particularly as they are related to African-Colombians and indigenous communities that have historically been disenfranchised. Afro-Colombians are more likely to live in remote and marginalized communities in Colombia. They are more likely to have many disadvantages that have—than I have time to articulate. But with their collective efforts to exercise their democratic rights, strengthen institutions and demand a seat at the table, African-Colombians

in indigenous communities are making progress. Colombian elections in recent years demonstrate that, despite hardships, African-Colombians are showing up at the ballot box. And I am encouraged by that. I am also encouraged by Brazilians who are demanding greater transparency in their government. Similarly with elections on the horizon, Mexicans are pressing for a change. They're not just satisfied with what is. That is what democracy calls for, the people's voices to be heard. And perhaps one of the most democratically vulnerable nations right now in our hemisphere is indeed Venezuela. Here is yet another example of the importance of the United States not simply condemning a nation but rather working directly with our partners to do all we can to strengthen institutions so that the people can exert their will in democratic countries.

The United States alone—I talked about this at our full committee hearing, that I have not seen any sanctions work where they are unilateral, but multilateral sanctions can make a difference. And so the United States alone cannot and will not make a difference in Venezuela. It is regional organizations like the OAS, and our allies and partners, that must be a part of any effort to help the people of Venezuela. There is still space for political opposition parties in Venezuela. And to that, I have hope. I think too often we reach for condemnation when what is most necessary is the often quiet and underappreciated work of diplomats and strategic leaders who understand that a hemisphere that we all live in, are all critically linked.

So I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today about the upcoming 2018 elections, how they fit into the broader scope of democratic trends in the hemisphere, because as the saying goes: We are as strong as our weakest link. And I want to thank the chairman and the ranking member for this very timely and important hearing. And I can't wait to hear the testimony of our witnesses. And I yield back.

Mr. COOK. Thank you very much, Congressman.

I just want you to check the panel here: We have got Florida, Florida, Florida, Florida. And I had to make a ruling that they he could not pass out free oranges to influence your testimony, because the best oranges are from California. But saying that, I will now recognize Congressman DeSantis.

Mr. DESANTIS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I just wanted to make one comment. Last month, the President made a historic decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital. It has been something that has been very popular in the United States. Many Presidents have promised it. It was something that people warned may cause repercussions in the Arab world, but it really hasn't happened. Part of it is because we are an 800 pound gorilla and a lot of those countries need us more than we need them, particularly with the specter of Iran. And so, as courageous of a decision as it was, it is much more difficult for some smaller countries to make the same decision.

But I just wanted to commend Guatemala for announcing recently that they are going to move their Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem and that they are going to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's eternal capital. They have stuff to lose because as a very small country, how the Arab League reacts to them is probably going to

be different than how the Arab League would react or has reacted to the United States. So I think it is important for us in America to say to Guatemala: We support you. We commend your courage in making that decision, and we hope other countries in Latin America and throughout the rest of the world will follow suit very shortly.

With that, I yield back.

Mr. COOK. Thank you very much.

With that, I turn to Congressman Rooney for an opening statement.

Mr. ROONEY. Thank you, Chairman Cook. Thank you, Ranking Member Sires. It is a real honor and pleasure to see distinguished presenters here today.

I just want to make a couple of comments on things I am thinking about. I spent a lot of time in Latin America. You know, back in 2006, Peru took a different direction and tried it our way, and it has worked out pretty well for Peru, free enterprise and the rule of law. My friend Ray Hunt spent a \$½ billion on an LNG plant down there. It shows that investment will follow good government. Now we have the Pacific Alliance, you know, with Colombia, Peru, Chile, and Mexico, and I believe soon to be Panama. I think those are green shoots for Latin America. And we recently have the Panama Canal completion and the election of Juan Carlos Varela to replace a very, very corrupt Ricardo Martinelli.

On the other hand, we still have Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela. Venezuela is descending into total chaos. The average Venezuelan I think we learned here at Chairman Cook's subcommittee hearing has lost 8 kilos in the last year, and we have Nicaragua somewhere in the middle ground. This may be controversial for some of my colleagues from Florida, but having done business in Nicaragua and knowing many private sector people, Ortega is a complex guy. He is a horrible, authoritarian crook who runs drugs and sucks up to Iranians. But at the same time, the private sector loves him, employment is down, and less than 500 people have immigrated from Nicaragua in the last couple of years. I don't think I've ever seen a greater dichotomy from an authoritarian ruler who takes care of the private sector.

So just a few things that I was thinking about to kind of frame the discussion. I appreciate you all being here. And, Chairman, thank you for holding this hearing.

Mr. COOK. Thank you very much.

Before I recognize our panel with your testimony, I am going to try to explain the lighting system in front of you. Each have 5 minutes for your opening statement. When you begin, the light will turn green. If you are color blind, we are all in trouble. When you have a minute left, the light will turn yellow. And when your time has expired, the light will turn red. These are the instructions that they give me so I won't screw up this. I ask that you conclude your testimony once the red light comes on, please.

After our witnesses testify, members will have 5 minutes to ask questions. I urge my colleagues to stick to them. Our first witness to testify will be Ms. Katya Rimkunas, and she is the deputy director of Latin America and the Caribbean at the International Republican Institute, known as IRI. And she leads and manages pro-

grams to strengthen democratic institutions and processes in 15 countries and oversees the institute's Washington base and regional staff. Prior to joining International Republican Institute, she worked in the office of Senator John McCain.

Our second witness to testify is Mr. Michael Svetlik, the vice president of programs at the International Foundation for Electoral Systems. In this role, Mr. Svetlik provides policy and programming guidance to the international operations that include electoral assistance and democratic institution building in over 30 countries. Prior to his position, he had served as the senior director of programs regional director for Europe and Asia at IFES and was a senior lecturer at the National School of Public Administration in Warsaw and served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Poland.

Our last witness to testify will be Mr. Jim Swigert, senior associate and regional director for Latin American and Caribbean programs at the National Democratic Institute, NDI. In this role, he supports democratic development by strengthening political parties, civil organizations, parliaments, safeguarding elections and promoting citizen participation, openness, accountability in government. That is a real mouth full to carry out all those things. Wow. Before joining NDI, this gentleman served 30 years as a career diplomat with the U.S. Department of State, serving Embassies in Latin America and Europe. He also worked on the staff of former chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Representative Dante Fascell.

With that, we will now begin, and Ms. Rimkunas, welcome aboard. You can begin your testimony. Thank you.

**STATEMENT OF MS. KATYA RIMKUNAS, DEPUTY DIRECTOR,
LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN, INTERNATIONAL RE-
PUBLICAN INSTITUTE**

Ms. RIMKUNAS. I thank you again for the opportunity to testify in the upcoming elections taking place in Latin America. Twelve countries will hold elections in 2018, and they will do so against the backdrop of high level corruption scandals, stagnant or minimal economic growth, sustained high levels of violence, and declining support for democracy.

Disaffection with democracy and growing citizen dissatisfaction with the political establishment is a dangerous mix that could influence the outcome and legitimacy of various elections. If elections are badly managed, this also has the potential to undermine public confidence and worsen the political situation. With all 12 countries experiencing elections are important, I will touch upon a few that could have far-reaching repercussions.

In Mexico, citizens are increasingly fed up with what they perceive to be systematic and entrenched corruption that has infected all levels of government and affected their financial bottom line. The national anticorruption system, the SNA, which was created in 2016, serves as a coordinating agency between the government agencies and civil society in order to strengthen collaboration in the fight against corruption, but despite the progress it has made, the culture of transparency that it seeks to promote has yet to filter through to the rest of government.

The next President of Mexico will have the opportunity to lead the fight against corruption by better supporting the SNA. Mexico has also been plagued by some of the region's highest levels of crime and violence. This violence also spills over to electoral periods. In a little over a month, 11 politicians, 5 of whom aspire to run for office, were murdered. While violence and crime is a multifaceted issue with many causes, some Mexicans blame the weak and partial implementation of judicial reform set in motion in 2008. This year's elections will determine whether these reforms are fully implemented or scrapped altogether.

Mexico's National Electoral Institute needs assistance with combatting disinformation, international observation missions, and post-election support to enhance legitimacy. Mexico's special prosecutor for the attention of electoral crime, one of the institutions that helps with the Federal electoral process, has also requested international assistance with electoral observation.

In Colombia, the next President will have the difficult task of implementing the peace agreement reached with the FARC and carrying out the reforms promised. This will not be easy as there is a general dissatisfaction with the progress in implementing the agreement. There is increased unrest in communities where citizens feel that the government has failed to deliver on its promises. These communities, often in rural areas and post-conflict zones, have local governments which tend to be disconnected from the central government and have a lower capacity to govern. Yet they are charged with the implementation of a lot of these reforms.

In order to do this successfully, local governments must also be able to communicate and coordinate with their Federal Government colleagues. It is vital to support increased government capacity in these rural communities and help to open up channels of communication between different levels of government.

Colombian elections are historic, as the FARC will participate for the first time. Under the peace agreement, they are guaranteed at least 10 seats in Congress for the next two elections. While the FARC's organization and influence in rural areas could help them in the elections, the group remains vastly unpopular on the national level.

In Venezuela, President Maduro could schedule the Presidential elections for as early as the first quarter of this year to consolidate power prior to further deterioration of the economy. Maduro has taken steps to ensure his victory in the elections by banning the main opposition political parties from running. The last few elections show how far the government is willing to win, including the consolidation, closing, and late move of electoral precincts to confuse and discourage voters, manipulate votes, and use and abuse government resources and benefits to essentially hold votes hostage. These techniques will likely be used again for the elections in addition to an electoral council packed with government cronies and government control over the media, all of which leaves little chance for legitimate free and fair electoral processes, and it discourages voters from participating.

In order to achieve a free and fair electoral process, the government would at minimum have to roll back all the structural obstacles it has put into place, including changing the electoral council

to provide for balanced presentation of the opposition and allow for domestic and international electoral observations.

In Cuba, Raul Castro is set to step down in April. The road to selecting a new President is an election in name only. The Cuban Government has long asserted its power to ensure complete control over the process in its outcome. And these elections are really no different.

The National Assembly will elect a new President who is expected to be current first Vice President Miguel Diaz-Canel. However, Castro is expected to remain the head of the Communist Party, thus retaining most of the decision making power on the island. Some suspect that Castro may try to maneuver his son, Colonel Alejandro Castro Espin, into the Presidency. However, he is not part of the upper ranks of the Communist Party, military or government, nor is he a member of the National Assembly, although that could change with the upcoming selection of new National Assembly members.

In the tightly controlled and repressive environment, Cubans continue to demand the opportunity to control their destinies. Cuban youth especially are increasingly pessimistic about their futures, disconnected from the regime, and want to leave their country. The U.S. should support programs that provide outlets to these disaffected youth and civil society actors. Additional assistance to increase the island's connectivity with the outside world and within the island is also needed.

And I would be remiss if I didn't quickly mention El Salvador's legislative and local elections taking place in March. These will be a bellwether for important 2019 Presidential elections. The last two elections there were contested, and there were allegations of electoral irregularities and fraud. The 2018 elections will be a test for the country's electoral tribunal to see how far they have come in recent years. Support for this tribunal, electoral monitoring, and greater civic engagement in the process is needed from now through next year's elections.

In conclusion, as Latin America approaches a highly consequential year of elections, many things remain unclear. But what is apparent is that the direction of these countries will impact the U.S., especially on issues like the economy, immigration, and security. It is vital that Congress and the administration support efforts by our partners to ensure free and fair elections throughout the region and continue to work to strengthen transparency and the rule of law throughout Latin America. Support for improved governance, stronger democratic institutions and more active and coordinated civil society is needed to ensure that elected officials are able to address core challenges, such as corruption and rampant violence, in order to ensure that citizens can have faith in their democratic systems.

Again, I am grateful for the opportunity to appear before this committee, and I look forward to your questions, thank you.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Rimkunas follows:]

Upcoming Elections in Western Hemisphere: Implications for U.S. Policy

TESTIMONY OF: **Katya Rimkunas,**
Regional Deputy Director, Latin America and the Caribbean

U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee
January 10, 2017

Introduction

Chairman Cook, Congressman Sires, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the upcoming round of elections set to take place throughout the Latin America region in 2018.

Overview

This year, Latin America will embark upon some of the most consequential elections in the region's recent history, with the potential to alter the direction of the region's governance and economic development. Eleven countries will hold elections in 2018, meaning three quarters of all citizens in Latin America will have the opportunity to elect new leaders against a backdrop of high-level corruption scandals that have touched almost every country in the region; stagnant or minimal economic growth; sustained high levels of violence; and declining support for democracy.

According to a recent survey by Vanderbilt University's Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), support for democracy and its core principles and institutions had decreased by almost nine percent between 2014 and 2017. This is particularly worrisome in a region where autocratic rule remains a problem. Disaffection with democracy, growing citizen dissatisfaction and anger towards the political establishment is a dangerous mix that could influence the outcome and legitimacy of various elections. If elections are badly managed, this also has the potential to undermine public confidence and worsen the political situation.

Young voters are also expected to have an impact on the outcome of these elections. The average rate of youth unemployment rose from 18.9 percent in 2016 to 19.5 percent in 2017—meaning one in every five young adults is unemployed. While Latin America as a whole has seen significant economic growth over the last decade, 2017 was marked by an almost stagnant economy in which the region saw a mere 1.2 percent GDP growth. At the same time, Latin America also has a growing middle-class who now have an opportunity and the time to worry about where their money is going and how their politicians and elected officials are responding to their needs and demands.

Undoubtedly, corruption will be one of the foremost issues in all eleven elections. Almost every country has seen its share of corruption scandals over the past few years, most notably those tied to the Brazilian construction company Odebrecht and its extensive tangle of graft. The fact that a number of high-level politicians have been in the Odebrecht scandal has served as confirmation for many Latin Americans that their political class and business elites are irredeemably corrupt. Transparency International's most recent Global Corruption Barometer report found that 62 percent of Latin Americans think corruption has increased and perceive politicians to be the most corrupt. Countries like Mexico, Guatemala, and Argentina have embarked upon anti-corruption initiatives in response to a clear steer from voters that they are looking to politicians to clean up the status quo.

Rampant crime is another pressing issue for many in Latin America. The region continues to have high homicide rates, add 14 out of the 20 most dangerous countries in the world are located in Latin America. Even Costa Rica, which is considered to be one of the safest in the region, hit a record high murder rate in 2017.

Insecurity and violence are tied in part to weak security and judicial institutions. Crimes go uninvestigated, untried, creating an atmosphere of impunity of criminals and popular frustration and disaffection with

government. According to the University of the Americas Puebla's Center for Studies on Impunity and Justice 2017 Global Impunity Index, nearly half of the 19 Latin American countries examined scored amongst the worst globally, and Mexico had the worst impunity score in the region. Crime and insecurity are also symptomatic of low governance capacity among elected officials, especially at the local level. This environment of insecurity and impunity creates vulnerabilities to election-related violence, which has been a problem in the past in Mexico and Colombia.

While all 11 countries experiencing elections in 2018 are important, five of those electoral results could have far-reaching repercussions.



Mexico

Mexico will hold general elections on July 1, 2018, with voters selecting the next president, senators, federal deputies, and 2,787 local positions. In total, 3,416 government positions will be contested. The elections will also mark a number of firsts for Mexico: the first time independent candidates unaffiliated with a political party are permitted run for president; the first time all political parties have formed electoral coalitions; the first time the 2014 constitutional electoral reforms will be tested; and the first time Mexicans abroad will be able to vote for their governors and mayors.

Young voters will also play a significant role in the elections as Mexico now has a youth bulge, with more than 30 percent of youth now eligible to vote. Furthermore, four out of every ten voters will be between the ages of 22 and 36. Historically, youth have been largely shut out of internal party leadership positions, so it is no surprise that Mexican youth have little taste for the country's traditional parties: young people comprise only 20 percent of political party members.

Despite their low levels of participation, young Mexicans have a vital role to play in the country's political future. If they are to have any influence on the political process, additional support to encourage youth participation is needed. At the International Republican Institute (IRI), our signature youth initiative, Generation Democracy, works throughout Mexico to incorporate youth as a key partner in all our programs.

Corruption will be among the top issues in mind when Mexican voters cast their ballots. Mexicans are increasingly fed up with what they perceive to be systematic and entrenched corruption that has infected all levels of government and affected their financial bottom line.

Bowing to popular demand, President Enrique Peña Nieto created the National Anti-Corruption System (SNA) in 2016 to serve as a coordinating agency between government agencies and civil society in order to strengthen collaboration in the fight against corruption. The SNA not only serves as a commission dedicated to combatting corruption, but a law that organizes and provides structure to diverse, and often competing, government institutions. IRI works with the SNA to strengthen coordination and cooperation between public and private sector, civil society, and academia to jointly tackle corruption, while also empowering citizens to make their voices heard—for example, through the InCorruptible platform, which allows citizens to address and map corruption.

Despite the progress made by the SNA, the culture of transparency that it seeks to promote has yet to filter through to the rest of the government. Only 13 out of 32 states have passed constitutional reforms, and just two have implemented laws to support these reforms. The next president of Mexico will have the opportunity

to lead the fight against corruption by better supporting the SNA; unfortunately, at this juncture continuing support is not a given.

Mexico has been plagued by some of the region's highest levels of crime and violence. In 2017, the country registered a record number of murders, making it the deadliest year in its modern history. This violence also spills over to electoral periods. In a little over one month 11 politicians—five of whom aspired to run for office—were murdered. Mexico's military retains a law enforcement role, which could become permanent, as the Congress recently passed controversial legislation institutionalizing the military's role in enforcing citizen security.

While violence and crime is a multi-faceted issue with many causes, some Mexicans blame judicial reforms set in motion in 2008 which should have been implemented by 2016 for allowing some criminals to go free. The reforms have been only partially adopted in some states and not others, leaving citizens and those officials affected by the changes confused between the old written trial system and the new oral process. IRI works Mexican civil society and government entities at all levels to build public awareness and support for the new justice system in order to bridge the gap between government and citizens and improve citizen security. The Institute's Seguridad con Justicia (Security with Justice) program, funded by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) via the U.S.–Mexico Merida Initiative, builds public understanding of the new system at all levels of government and educates citizens on the reforms. This year's presidential and legislative elections will determine whether these reforms are fully implemented or scrapped altogether.

Mexico's established parties—the National Action Party (PAN), the Institutional Revolution Party (PRI), and the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD)—have lost credibility and support throughout the years. According to recent polls, former mayor of Mexico City Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (known as AMLO) has emerged as the front runner. AMLO is running for president for a third time under his National Regeneration Movement (MORENA) party. AMLO has become more moderate and has cautiously distanced himself from some of his more radical left-leaning stance, even entering into a coalition with the conservative Social Encounter Party (PES). He is also campaigning on all three major issues: corruption, violence and insecurity, and economic development.

For the first time, the PAN and PRD will form a coalition and support one presidential candidate. PAN's former president, Ricardo Anaya, is expected to head the ticket, but the current Mayor of Mexico City and PRD member Angel Mancera is also expected to compete for the coalition's nomination. Former first lady Margarita Zavala was until recently a member of the PAN and declared her intention to run for president back in 2015; however, internal party disputes led her to break off with the party and she is now running as an independent. The PRI, which has joined forces with two other parties, is expected to put forward former Finance Minister Jose Antonio Meade, who is not a member of the party, in an effort to distance itself from incumbent Peña Nieto's dismal approval ratings.

Two additional independent candidates have gained attention in what is turning into a crowded field. Former independent Governor of Nuevo Leon Jaime Rodríguez has announced his candidacy, despite the fact that his record is marred by corruption scandals and media confrontations; and María de Jesús Patricia (also known as "Marichuy") is running under the National Indigenous Congress and the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, with which it is closely aligned.

Mexico's National Electoral Institute (INE) is well-respected in the region. However, the Institute needs assistance with combating disinformation; international observation missions to enhance the legitimacy of the results; and post-election support to enhance legitimacy. Mexico's Special Prosecutor for the Attention of Electoral Crimes (FEPADE), one of the institutions that helps with the federal electoral process, has also requested international assistance with electoral observation.



Venezuela

Per Venezuela's constitution, the country should hold presidential elections in 2018. Traditionally these have taken place in the last quarter of the given year. However, many analysts believe that President Nicolas Maduro will schedule the elections for as early as the first quarter of 2018. Given the country's disastrous economy, growing humanitarian crisis, high levels of insecurity, blatant oppression against anyone perceived as in opposition to his government, and his intention to run for re-election, it is not a surprise that Maduro would try to move the date of these largely pre-determined elections up, as this will allow Maduro to exploit divisions within the political opposition and consolidate power prior to further deterioration of the economy. Some economist estimate that the country's inflation rate could hit 30,000 percent and higher in 2018.

Early elections could weaken the opposition and catch them off-guard leaving insufficient time to unite behind a single candidate and mount a proper presidential campaign. In December 2017, Maduro also took further steps to ensure his victory in the next presidential election by banning the main opposition political parties from taking part in the 2018 elections. The Justice First, Popular Will and Democratic Action parties had boycotted the December 2017 municipal elections to protest a rigged electoral system. The boycott was the second that year after the opposition also shunned an earlier National Constituent Assembly election on the grounds that it was unconstitutional.

These two elections made it blatantly apparent how far the government was willing to go to secure an electoral win: including the consolidation, closing, and late move of electoral precincts to confuse and discourage voters; manipulation of votes; and the use and abuse of government resources and benefits to essentially hold votes hostage. These techniques will likely be used once again for the presidential elections, in addition to an electoral council packed with government cronies, and government control over the media and persistent disinformation campaign—all of which leaves little chance for a legitimate, free and fair electoral process, and discourages eligible voters from participating.

Venezuelan government and political opposition leaders have unsuccessfully engaged in talks outside of the country to see if they can reach a solution to the current crisis. Opposition representatives have included the guarantee of an equal, free and fair electoral process as part of their demands. In order to achieve this, the Maduro government would at minimum have to roll back all of the structural obstacles it has put into place, including changing the electoral council to provide for balanced representation of the opposition and allow for domestic and international electoral observations. Further international pressure on Venezuela, not only from the United States, but also from throughout the region and Europe, could help in these efforts.



Cuba

After almost 60 years of rule by the Castros, Raul Castro is set to step down in April 2018. The road to selecting a new president is an election in name only. The Cuban government has long asserted its power to ensure complete control over the process and its outcome, and these elections are no different. In November

2017, local elections for more than 12,500 positions took place without allowing a single opposition candidate to compete. Local elections are the only electoral process in which Cubans have a direct vote, but candidates are restricted to those approved by the regime. Of the almost 30,000 candidates, 175 linked to a dissident movement were nominated, and all were disqualified under specious pretexts before Election Day. The electoral processes that will unfold in prior to April 2018 are tightly-controlled by the government, and the majority of Cubans do not have the opportunity to participate.

The Council of State announced recently that elections to determine provincial assemblies and National Assembly deputies will be held in March. The National Assembly will elect the new president, vice president, and 31-member Council of State from among its members in April. Cuba's current First Vice President, Miguel Diaz-Canel, is expected succeed Castro as president. However, Castro is expected to remain the head of the Communist Party, thus retaining most of the decision-making power on the island. Diaz-Canel, born after the revolution took place, is a former minister for higher education and Communist Party member, although he is not one of the top leaders within the party and is not an important leader within the Cuban military. Consequently, it is difficult to believe that he would have the support, willingness, or ability to challenge Castro's continued grip on power.

Some analysts suspect that Castro may try to maneuver his only son, Colonel Alejandro Castro Espin, into the presidency. Castro Espin is part of his father's personal staff and was involved in the negotiations with the U.S. to normalize relations announced in 2014. However, he is not part of the upper echelons of the Communist Party, military or government, nor is he a member of the National Assembly—although that could change with the upcoming selection of new National Assembly members.

In this tightly-controlled and repressive environment, Cubans continue to demand the opportunity to control their destinies. Cuban youth in particular are increasingly pessimistic about their futures, disconnected from the regime and want to leave their country. The U.S. should support programs that provide outlets to these disaffected youth and civil society actors. Additional assistance to increase the island's connectivity with the outside world and within the island is also needed, as communication within the country can be just as difficult as connecting internationally. To improve the situation, Cubans need access to equipment, software and training related to increasing internet and wireless connectivity, including the use of short-wave radios.



Colombia

The next president of Colombia will have the onerous tasks of implementing the peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and carrying out reforms promised as part of the agreement in the areas heavily affected by the conflict. This will not be an easy task as there is general dissatisfaction with the progress in implementing the peace agreement.

According to a Gallup poll, 55 percent of Colombians are unhappy with the way in which the agreement is being implemented. There is increased unrest in communities where citizens are feel that the government has failed to deliver on its promises. These communities, often in rural areas, have local governments which tend to be disconnected from the central government and have a lower capacity to govern, yet are charged with the implementation of many of these reforms—including reparations for victims of the FARC and the re-integration of internal displaced populations. In order to do this successfully, local governments must also be able to communicate and coordinate with their federal government colleagues. In order to deliver on these

promises, it is vital to support increased government capacity in these rural communities and help to open up channels of communication between different levels of government.

Colombia will hold legislative elections on March 11 and the first round of presidential elections on May 27. The country's 2018 elections are historic, as FARC will participate for the first time under their newly formed political party, the Common Alternative Revolutionary Force (keeping the same acronym). Under the peace agreement signed in 2016, the FARC are guaranteed at least ten seats in Congress: five in the House and another five in the Senate, for the next two elections and through 2026. Their participation in the elections and the subsequent elected offices they will hold will re-shape the political landscape in Colombia. While the FARC's organization and influence in rural areas could help them in the elections, the group remains vastly unpopular on the national level: according to a November Gallup poll, 79 percent of Colombians have an unfavorable opinion of the FARC.

While most of the international attention will center on the presidential elections, the outcome of the congressional elections will be a bell weather for those elections. The large number of independent candidates running for Congress could make it difficult for the winning presidential candidate to form a coalition in Congress and could lead to difficulties governing. As Congress will continue to play an important role in the implementation of key reforms needed to implement the peace agreement successfully, the make-up of this body will be crucial.

The next president will also have to confront issues including corruption, justice reform, and the unravelling situation in neighboring Venezuela. Despite these challenges, a staggering number of presidential candidates (53) are running, many as independents. According to a November 2017 Gallup poll, 89 percent of Colombians have an unfavorable opinion of political parties. This growing dissatisfaction with political parties and an increase in independent options could signal a shift away from the traditional party system that previously dominated Colombia. Like many countries in the region, this break from the political establishment can be blamed on the many corruption scandals plaguing political leaders, increased distrust in politicians, and overall mismanagement.

Former Vice President German Vargas Lleras is one of the current frontrunners in the presidential election. Until recently, he was the leader of the Radical Change party, but chose to run as an independent in an effort to appeal to a broader group than his former party's small party base. He will also need to distance himself from current President Manuel Santos, whose approval ratings sit at around 30 percent. Vargas Lleras will compete against Medellin Mayor Sergio Fajardo, who has been leading in some polls, and former Bogota Mayor Gustavo Petro, who was plagued with scandals during his tenure.

On the opposite end of the political spectrum is Senator Ivan Duque, running under former President Alvaro Uribe's center-right Democratic Center party. At 41-years old, Duque is the youngest candidate and will have to defeat former Defense Minister Marta Lucia Ramirez in order to lead the center-right coalition. Also running is FARC leader Rodrigo Londono (also known as "Timochenko"), who is likely to be tried for human rights abuses under the transitional justice tribunals. With so many candidates in the field, it is unlikely that one will win at least 50 percent of the votes plus one in the first round, in which case the top two candidates will face off in a second round on June 17.

Brazil

Brazil has experienced perhaps the biggest backlash against the corruption scandals that have embroiled the country in recent years—launching a wave of civic movements focused on preparing new, young candidates. However, these movements could be co-opted by entrenched political elites given their lack of formal hierarchical organizational structures and a desire by political parties to minimize competition.

Political parties have been disconnected from their constituents. As a result, 87 percent of Brazilians believe that the government advocates for its self-interest alone and only 24 percent trust that the government will do what is right for their country. Current President Michel Temer's approval is so low that there is a palpable appetite among voters for change in the October 2018 elections, although that may not necessarily mean putting a new face in power. The leading candidate is former president Lula da Silva, who was convicted of corruption and whose final candidacy is contingent on his appeal. Da Silva is also running on an anti-reform campaign, which could impact the country's recent economic recovery. According to polls, his most formidable opponent Congressman Jair Bolsonaro, a former army captain and extreme nationalist with a militaristic bent. Former Environment Minister Marina Silva is currently polling third, but will likely tie with Bolsonaro if da Silva is disqualified.

Ecuador and El Salvador

There are two additional electoral processes that are worth highlighting: Ecuador will hold a popular referendum on February 4 and El Salvador's legislative and local elections will take place in March. Ecuadorians will vote on seven questions, including eliminating indefinite reelections; reforming the Citizen Participation Council (which had been used by former President Rafael Correa to his favor); and the barring of public officials from holding any public office if convicted of corruption. The referendum will test President Lenin Moreno's ability to break away from his predecessor and solidify popular support. Several of the questions are also seen as olive branches to voting blocs previously alienated by Correa's government and an opportunity to establish stronger rule of law and improve transparency.

In El Salvador, local and legislative elections will be a bellwether for the important presidential elections taking place in 2019. El Salvador's last two elections were hotly-contested and fraught with allegations of electoral irregularities and fraud, fueling tensions between political parties and within society. Unsurprisingly, a majority of Salvadorans have little-to-no confidence in their electoral institutions. The 2018 elections will be a test of the country's Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) to see how far they have come in recent years. Support for the TSE, civil society organizations supporting electoral monitoring and greater civic engagement in the process is needed from now through next year's elections. IRI's programming is addressing some of these challenges for the country's 2018 elections, but additional assistance is needed for 2019.

Recommendations

- 1) **Strengthen the fight against corruption.** Endemic and entrenched corruption undermines any reforms and advancements governments try to make. It also weakens citizens' confidence in their government and democracy. It is important to support the ability of state systems to combat corruption and support civil society as an external source of pressure.
- 2) **Help to improve governance.** Beyond elections, assistance is needed to strengthen the ability of governments and elected leaders to do their jobs and deliver on their promises. Support should also be given to civil society to hold governments accountable.

3) **Support the renovation of political parties.** Citizens throughout Latin America have lost trust in political parties. Strong political parties are essential to healthy democratic systems. The U.S. should support political parties in overhauling their structures to make them more accessible and transparent, and able to engage with all citizens, especially youth.



Conclusion

As Latin America approaches a highly consequential year of elections, many things remain unclear—but what is apparent is that the direction these countries will impact the U.S., especially on issues like the economy, migration, and security. It is vital that Congress and the Administration support efforts by our partners to ensure free and fair elections throughout the region, and continue to work to strengthen transparency and the rule of law throughout Latin America. Support for improved governance, stronger democratic institutions, and more active and coordinated civil society is needed to ensure that elected officials are able to address core challenges such as corruption and rampant violence, in order to ensure that citizens can have faith in their democratic systems. I am grateful for the opportunity to appear before this subcommittee and look forward to your questions.

Mr. COOK. Thank you very much.
Mr. Svetlik, you are recognized.

**STATEMENT OF MR. MICHAEL SVETLIK, VICE PRESIDENT OF
PROGRAMS, INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION FOR ELEC-
TORAL SYSTEMS**

Mr. SVETLIK. Mr. Chairman, ranking member and distinguished members of the subcommittee, on behalf my organization IFES, thank you for this opportunity to discuss the vital role of election management bodies in ensuring credible elections in Latin America in 2018.

With generous backing from USAID and other international donors, IFES supports electoral processes worldwide. We are proud to work with our Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening partners, IRI and NDI, to build strong, inclusive democratic institutions.

Mr. Chairman, professional, transparent, and independent electoral institutions are the backbone of democracy. These bodies administer and oversee electoral processes that engender democratic stability, promote peace, and enhance social inclusion. Latin American electoral institutions were at the center of many successful democratic transitions over the past two decades, and they will play a critical role in the region's 2018 election super cycle.

Despite significant progress, Latin American democracy is at a crossroads, conditions are ripe for backsliding, largely due to a rise in disillusionment and a growing deficit of trust. As the 2017 Latinobarometro survey indicates, overall confidence in public institutions, including electoral tribunals, has declined since 2013. In fact, only 28, 29 percent of Latin Americans express confidence in electoral tribunals, down from 51 percent in 2006. And, lastly, 15 percent of those surveyed say they trust political parties. This low level of trust has been consistent over the past decade, falling from a high of 28 percent in 1997.

In light of this crisis of confidence, professional and independent election management is increasingly important. Mexico, for example, has enjoyed considerable success in election management over the past two decades through investment in well-resourced, independent and professional bodies. We applaud Mexico for the strength and capacity of its institutions, particularly the National Electoral Institute and the electoral tribunal.

However, Mexico still faces several challenges that are common to elections across the region. First, illicit money and campaign finance. The enforcement of campaign finance regulation remains a persistent Achilles heel and bears close watching. Next, elections are on trial, election arbiters, the courts will be tested with both pre- and post-election legal challenges that will require rapid resolution.

Next, cybersecurity and outside influence. The likelihood of cyber attacks varies across the region but looms as a potential threat. Worse still is every country's vulnerability to disinformation, which is equally as damaging. And, lastly, inclusive democratic participation as broad participation across society is critical as democracy is more resilient when more groups are represented.

At the heart of each of these issues is citizen trust, and institutions and electoral results. Democracy only works if the people believe it is working, and electoral institutions are only effective if they win public confidence through transparency, accountability, and responsiveness. Electoral management bodies can build trust through such things as transparency in budgeting and procurement, through professional communication and strong presence on social media, through clear and accessible voter education, through consistency in results tabulation and transmission, and finally the timely release of election results through—and clear systems to address any election complaints.

More broadly speaking, Mr. Chairman, we ask you to consider the following for future assistance and engagement. We deeply appreciate Congress' support of robust funding levels for democracy programs and encourage you to leverage your oversight role in ensuring that appropriated funds are both obligated and spent.

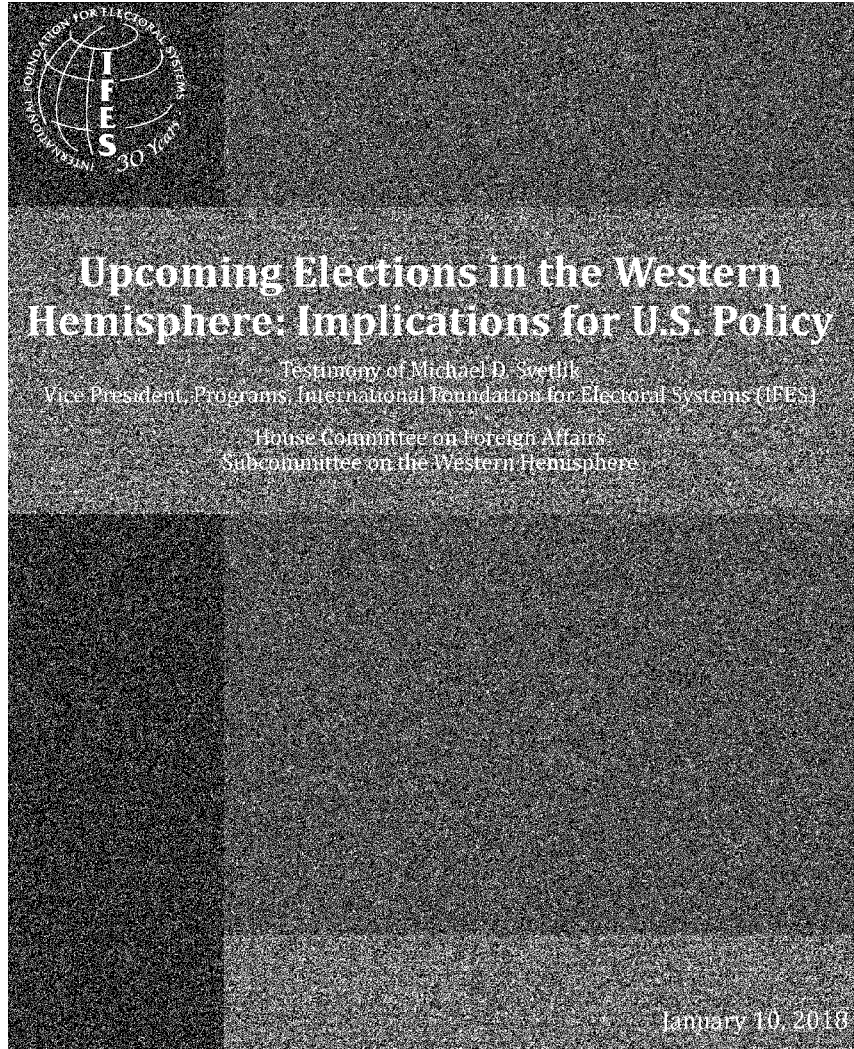
The U.S. Congress and the administration must unequivocally denounce efforts to erode fundamental democratic norms.

I thank you, Mr. Chairman, for your December 21st statement on the Honduran elections which expressed disappointment in irregularities but called for all parties to seek relief through established election-dispute mechanisms. We recommend as well that election assistance should start early and continue through the post-election period to allow for flexible and responsive programming. Multiyear, multi-election programs are the most impactful.

And, lastly, we recommend targeted support to improve electoral leadership, like facilitating peer-to-peer exchanges to build professional experience and spread best practices.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for this opportunity to testify. Two thousand and eighteen will be an important test for democratic institutions in Latin America. IFES remains committed to working with our partners and our friends in the region to promote continued democratic consolidation. I look forward to any questions you may have.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Svetlik follows:]



**Testimony of Michael D. Svetlik
Vice President, Programs, International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES)**

"Upcoming Elections in the Western Hemisphere: Implications for U.S. Policy"

**House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere**

January 10, 2018

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Sires, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee: on behalf of the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), I deeply appreciate this opportunity to testify on the upcoming elections in the Western Hemisphere and challenges to democracy in the region.

As a global leader in democracy promotion, IFES advances good governance and democratic rights by providing technical assistance to election officials; empowering the underrepresented to participate in the political process; and applying field-based research to improve every phase of the electoral cycle. For 30 years, IFES has worked in over 145 countries to ensure there is a vote for every voice.

With funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the U.S. Department of State, and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), IFES has supported decades of credible electoral processes across the region. In many countries, IFES works as part of the Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS), with the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute, under USAID's Global Elections and Political Transitions mechanism to deliver comprehensive democracy, human rights and governance (DRG) programming.

My testimony addresses challenges and opportunities in Latin America's 2018 electoral landscape, with a focus on regional trends, Mexico's July general elections, and recommendations for the United States Government (USG) and U.S. Congress. In recent years, and with few, notable exceptions, Latin America has made considerable progress in consolidating democracy and holding credible elections. Still, there is work to be done, particularly regarding such rapidly evolving issues as cybersecurity and external influence, and to encourage horizontal cooperation through south-south and peer-to-peer international exchanges. The U.S. should take a particularly close look at Mexico and Brazil's elections, which embody a shift from the left-right dichotomy to a popular reaction against corruption.

Thanks to years of investments and relationship building, USG is positioned to partner with Latin America to address such pervasive challenges such as corruption, ineffective leadership and inequality. In line with global trends, citizens are increasingly demanding higher quality elections that uphold transparency, social inclusion, and accountability. The fact that Latin America is facing increasingly complex and nuanced challenges is a direct reflection of the sophistication of its electoral systems.

The Western Hemisphere's 2018 Election Super-cycle

In 2018, almost 350 million Latin Americans – over half of the hemisphere's population – will vote in presidential elections,¹ and many more will participate in legislative elections. A seven-country electoral frenzy will kick off on February 4 (with general elections in Costa Rica) and end in December (with possible presidential elections in Venezuela):

- **February:** Costa Rican general elections ²
- **March:** Legislative elections in El Salvador and Colombia
- **April:** Costa Rican presidential run-off and Paraguay's general elections; Cuban legislative elections and presidential transition of power
- **May:** Colombian presidential election and presidential run-off
- **July:** Mexican presidential and legislative elections
- **October:** Brazilian presidential and legislative elections, as well as a presidential run-off
- **December:** Possible Venezuelan presidential election

Stable Democracies and Credible Elections Promote U.S. Interests

Stable democracies make for better trading partners, provide new market opportunities, improve global health outcomes, and promote economic freedom and regional security. As stated in the President's December 2017 National Security Strategy:³

Stable, friendly, and prosperous states in the Western Hemisphere enhance our security and benefit our economy. Democratic states connected by shared values and economic interests will reduce the violence, drug trafficking, and illegal immigration that threaten our common security, and will limit opportunities for adversaries to operate from areas of close proximity to us.

For example, USAID support has enabled IFES to provide technical assistance to Guatemala over its two most recent election cycles, and the Guatemalan election management body (EMB), the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE), continues to welcome IFES support as it prepares for the 2019 general elections. With USG and IFES assistance, Guatemala has continued to strengthen and reform its electoral framework, particularly the democratic and judicial institutions that have become reliable partners in the international fight against corruption, narcotics and human migration.

¹ <https://amp.theguardian.com/cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/amp.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/28/latin-america-elections-2018-corruption>

² <https://www.as-coa.org/articles/timeline-2017-and-2018-elections-latin-america>

³ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>

Electoral Assistance to Latin America Has Paid Dividends

Electoral assistance is a sound investment that pays long-term, tangible dividends – in its FY18 State and Foreign Operations bill, the House mandated that the administration spend no less than \$2.3 billion on democracy programs. This is less than .05 percent of the House-passed International Affairs Budget, which represents less than one percent of the overall budget. Electoral assistance programs themselves are a drop in the foreign assistance budget. For example, IFES' component of the Guatemala "Electoral Governance and Reforms Program Activity" – which seeks to advance electoral reforms and build the capacity of civil society organizations (CSOs) (particularly disabled persons' organizations [DPOs]) – operates at a budget of \$2.1 million over three years.

After a decade of generally increasing aid levels, USG assistance to Latin America decreased each year between FY2010 and FY2014 (aid increased slightly in FYs 2015 and 2016). This decline was "partially the result of reductions to the overall U.S. foreign assistance budget." However, it is also because investments in aid – particularly electoral assistance – have paid dividends: Electoral democracy has been consolidated in many countries; regular elections are the norm, with few exceptions (most glaringly, Venezuela); and countries such as Panama have even graduated from election assistance. This has allowed USG assistance to the region, as a proportion of total foreign assistance, to drop from nine percent in FY2005 to six percent in FY2015. Such Latin American countries as Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Uruguay now provide foreign assistance to other countries.⁴ This means our Latin American partners are stronger allies, and USG assistance can now be more targeted and impactful.

Regional Trends: Advanced Challenges Could Cause Backsliding

In general, Latin America has made considerable progress over the past three decades to consolidate democracy and build resilient democratic institutions. Competitive elections that are viewed as credible by voters and contestants alike are the norm. Even within this context, there remain several trends that highlight the need to remain vigilant as democracy continues to develop and evolve across the region.

Money and Politics

Money is an essential ingredient of politics and political campaigns, allowing parties and candidates to deliver their message to voters. Yet unequal distribution of campaign funds creates a skewed playing field, giving individuals and social groups with the economic resources an unfair advantage in elections and exaggerating their influence over candidates and parties. Latin America is a region characterized by inequality, which gives rise to electoral campaigns in which funding disparities are stark. In addition, the misuse of state resources can be a major corruptive force in the electoral process, as it introduces or exacerbates power inequalities and gives unfair electoral advantage to incumbents.

Recent cases of corruption – including the wrongful use of public funds and personal enrichment through government contracts like the notorious Odebrecht bribery case, among others – have left Latin Americans thirsty for change, and many incumbent politicians wary of election results. Latin America is

⁴ <https://fas.org/sgo/crs/row/R44647.pdf>

also a region where organized crime has a major presence, transacts billions of dollars each year in illicit business and has the potential to corrupt democratic institutions.

Campaign finance regulation is crucial to the preservation of democracy in the region. In Brazil, the Electoral Tribunal is trying to produce new resolutions to address challenges around money in elections that is not fully controlled (Brazilian interlocutors have estimated that three percent of election campaign funding comes from public funds, two percent donations from individuals, and the rest from businesses). There is a high presence of organized criminal groups in municipal elections in particular – many elected mayors have received funds from drug trafficking and organized crime. Furthermore, Brazilian evangelical organizations can collect money that is not tracked through official systems.

Low Institutional Credibility and Disillusionment with Democracy

Strong institutions are the backbone of durable and credible democracies and elections. In spite of progress made in recent decades, some regional electoral bodies have been crippled by a loss of institutional credibility contributing to a disillusionment with democracy. In Mexico, support for democracy declined by 10 percent in one year, down to 58 percent. In 2015, Mexican voters had the lowest satisfaction with democracy in all of Latin America, and less than half of citizens in the region expressed a belief that democracy is the best form of government.⁵ Many democratic institutions in the region are trying to address this. For example, the Federal Electoral Court of the Judicial Authority of Mexico (TEPJF) is working to strengthen the role of the courts in ensuring the constitutionality of government actions in a transparent way.

However, disillusionment continues to be exploited by those that benefit from a lack of public trust – losing candidates and parties, media companies, foreign actors, patronage networks, political consultants and technology providers. Venezuela's National Elections Council (CNE), for instance, has morphed into a tentacle of the ruling party and government. It does not uphold the values of independence and integrity for which it was created. The July 30, 2017 election for a new Constituent Assembly was rife with fraud and undemocratic practices and IFES – along with many others – condemned the vote. Indeed, Smartmatic, the company that provided the voting system software, released a statement saying there was no doubt that the results were manipulated.⁶ Voters were not even given the option of rejecting the plan to create the Constituent Assembly, which will have the power to dismiss any branch of government – including the opposition-controlled legislature – and no major election monitoring missions were allowed to observe the process.

Furthermore, last November's elections in Honduras also showed a dramatic step back in the credibility of the electoral authority. The election process was tarnished by many legal and technical irregularities, which has cast a damaging cloud of doubt over the institution.

⁵ <http://www.ifes.org/news/tackling-emerging-global-challenges-mexicos-2018-elections-cybersecurity-disillusionment-and>

⁶ <http://www.ifes.org/news/ifes-statement-crisis-venezuela>

The Rise of Independent Candidates: Why Voters are Turning Away from Weakened Parties

Strong party systems have long been a feature of democracy in Latin America, given their important role in providing citizens a means to participate and as a means to organize government. In recent years, unaffiliated or independent candidates have continued to multiply with each election cycle. This is due not only to the corruption that weakens and disqualifies traditional political players, but also an evident lack of leadership. This opens the doors to fresh, new and potentially bad actors, and has cultured a phenomenon in which traditional politicians work to be seen as outsiders. In Brazil, former military officer and presidential candidate Jair Bolsonaro is gaining support with an extreme right – but clear and direct – message against the traditional political class. In Colombia, perennial presidential candidate Sergio Fajardo has created a new political movement to serve as a platform for his candidacy, while in Mexico, Margarita Zavala recently resigned from the conservative National Action Party (PAN) party to run as an independent in the July federal elections.

The rise of independent candidates has a significant impact on the members of marginalized groups who want to run for office. Often, it can be challenging for women and members of other marginalized groups to garner support or receive a nomination from their parties, as they are often perceived as less electable than men (even though evidence does not support this). Therefore, they may turn to independent candidacy. While this allows them to be free from any certain policy agenda, independent candidates have no natural support base from parties, must procure all of their own funding, and often find it more difficult to win than party candidates. These findings would have implications for our technical assistance on how electoral bodies and parties can promote and increase the political participation of marginalized groups.

Elections on Trial: The Continuing Need for Strong, Independent Electoral Courts

As elections worldwide become more litigious, there is rising pressure on electoral tribunals and courts to resolve politically charged disputes and avoid the destabilization of political transitions. Latin America's electoral justice system (except for instances such as Venezuela) is largely rising to this challenge. The electoral courts have effectively advocated for the adoption of good practices and rules, from the use of new technologies at the service of greater transparency in elections, to the endeavor to assure equity in electoral contests. Latin America is also currently the only region with an established network of election arbiters, meeting annually to discuss specific election dispute resolution (EDR) issues, drawing directly from election cases in their own jurisdiction.

However, electoral justice is an area that will continue to face challenges and will only become more prominent as litigants turn to the courts to try and achieve what they could not accomplish at the polls. Mexico's TEPJF may hear up to 50,000 cases in 2018 (in comparison, the tribunal heard 16,000 cases in 2017). The TEPJF will only have 15 days to rule on these cases, requiring rigorous effort to ensure a process that is both efficient and fair. However, there are different funding levels for local courts across the country, with some receiving adequate funding and others receiving funding so insufficient that they do not even have an office. A lack of adequate funding can affect a local court's ability to effectively manage cases.

Although political aspirants and supporters may be involved in violence, bribery, hate speech and intimidation, few offenders are held to account, despite multiple punitive mechanisms that might exist across different institutions. This can make such offenses viable tactics both in campaigning and in post-

election agitation. For the sake of public confidence in rule of law and as an alternative to violence, it is imperative that election offenses do not go unpunished. However, prosecution is often complicated by threats and intimidation against individual judges, prosecutors and commissioners.

To mitigate these challenges, IFES is partnering with the TEPJF to pilot regional electoral jurisprudence networks to facilitate peer-to-peer knowledge exchange and professional support among election arbiters; develop a compendium of electoral case law to enhance access to information on precedents and fact patterns for arbiters; and develop a comparative research paper on case management systems to identify key principles for strengthening transparency and credibility in the management and disposition of election cases. This joint effort will draw extensively from the experience of electoral tribunals in the region.

Cybersecurity and Social Media: Adapting to a Fluid Landscape

Security and trust are key elements to any election. Throughout Latin America's 2018 super-cycle, voters must have confidence that final election results are also the correct ones.

EMBs must have in place systems, networks and equipment with appropriate security mechanisms. Security practices must prevent external interference and ensure confidentiality and data integrity. Every point of the electoral cycle – pre-election, post-election and Election Day – carries the potential for bad actors to sow enough distrust for the public to reject legitimate results: "Denial of Service" attacks, exploitation of software vulnerabilities, hacking, and spear phishing present just a few possible risks.

A decisive factor in trust-building is the development of tamper-proof technological platforms to transmit vote tallies. Results transmission is both the climax and most vulnerable point of the electoral process. Three power blackouts occurred during Honduras' November 2017 vote counting process; this accentuates the importance of strengthening cybersecurity at all levels, but particularly in the area of results transmission.

Social media has transformed elections worldwide. For citizens, social media is a means of grassroots advocacy, a place to join a cause and help it grow. For politicians, it is a new channel of communication to share their vision and platform. However, social media has become weaponized, particularly with the increased use of disinformation. Its great strength is also its weakness: There is no information "middle man," and barriers between information givers and receivers have melted away. Internet anonymity leads to impunity, which in politics and elections can be particularly harmful and damaging.

Internet use has grown dramatically in Latin America. Peru, for example, is the global leader in internet proliferation, surpassing even the United States and Mexico. Argentina and Brazil lead the world in engagement on social networks. In sum, around 80 percent of internet users in Latin America access social media, which shows the potential impact of disinformation. EMBs in the region have had to adapt to these realities and are developing not only specialized units to regulate social media impact in election administration (in Argentina, the government took serious steps to avoid external disinformation during last year's legislative elections), but are also promoting legislation to address formally these situations.

Fostering Inclusive Democracies: Ensuring all Groups are Active Participants

Inclusive and representative democracies provide for the full and active participation of all citizens irrespective of race, gender, religion, ethnicity or sexual identity. In Latin America, the proportion of women and Afro-descendant, indigenous, LGBT, and persons with disabilities in politics is far less than these groups' share of the general population. The region has made significant advances, but more work is needed to achieve fully representative governance, meaningful and equal participation of women and men in all spheres of political, economic and social life.

To date, 16 of the 33 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have adopted gender quota laws. Many credit this system for the fact that 25 percent to 50 percent of national legislatures in Latin American countries are female. And seven Latin American countries – Bolivia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Panama – have traded quotas for parity, mandating that parties run gender-balanced candidate lists. Parity laws in several countries extend these gender-balance requirements to the executive and the judicial branches. The evolution of such gender quota and parity laws offers reasons for optimism.

In Bolivia, indigenous people have special protections under the constitution, and the country has representative democracy, direct democracy (e.g., referendum), and community-based democracy, enforced by indigenous populations. Oftentimes, indigenous people are not “elected,” per se, but chosen by their own community and rules. This system represents a democracy with different levels and types, not just election by a vote. Mexico has adopted special protocols to resolve electoral disputes with a particular gender or indigenous perspective.

Mexico's July 2018 Elections: A Bellwether of Latin America's Progress and Challenges

Mexico's July 2018 elections are unprecedented in their magnitude and significance. Mexico will hold presidential, legislative, senatorial, gubernatorial (in nine states) elections, and elect the Head of Government of the Capital. Given this complexity, electoral democracy in Mexico is both an example of progress made to date and of work that remains to be done to improve the capacity and performance of electoral bodies, to strengthen citizen voices, and to mobilize voters. Within the context of widespread violence, corruption, and a strong influence of social media, the largest electoral date in the history of Mexico may also be an opportunity to revive Mexican anti-American sentiment and harm U.S.-Mexico relations.

The Capacity and Performance of Mexico's Electoral Bodies

The National Electoral Institute (INE) and the TEPJF are the cornerstones of the Mexican electoral ecosystem. The INE was founded on the principles of improving citizen participation, promoting peaceful and regular elections, and corroborating the legitimacy of election outcomes. It is responsible for organizing and overseeing federal elections, and for collaborating with sub-national electoral bodies to conduct local elections. To avoid politicization in INE, electoral claims are channeled through, and reviewed by, the TEPJF. The TEPJF is a permanent judicial body dedicated to the resolution of electoral cases and consists of 32 state-level tribunals, five regional tribunals and the Superior Court, which shares constitutional authority on par with the Mexican Supreme Court.

The heart of the capacity and performance of INE is found in its professional staff. The recruitment, selection, training, and evaluation of staff to provide electoral services, especially in its fundamental areas, is critical to the competent preparation and organization of elections. This is also true for the TEPJF's professional staff.

The three types of challenges these electoral authorities face are: 1) Coordination between national and local electoral authorities; 2) political conflict; and 3) the electorate's apathy. The INE must ensure voting procedures are respected and judiciously oversee the use of public spending in campaign and the access media slots. The INE must also respond swiftly to a candidate's inability or unwillingness to accept and publicly acknowledge his or her defeat in a close and contentious vote. This was an issue most recently in the 2017 local elections Coahuila, Mexico State, and Nayarit, as well as during the presidential election of 2006, when the runner-up candidate refused to accept the official results and contributed to social unrest, affecting the credibility of the electoral authority.

Again, the TEPJF's challenge will be the significant increase in the number of cases that is likely to hear. It should be underlined that as of today, the TEPJF is being flooded with complaints from members of different political parties under the allegation that they have not been treated fairly (in the selection process for candidacy).

Cybersecurity and Outside Influence in Mexico

In recent months, there has been some speculation in the United States that the 2018 elections can be a strategic target to alter geopolitical balance. Mexico, like most countries, does not have legislation regulating cybersecurity and elections. As concerns about election technology and cybersecurity grow, countries are reverting to trusted processes and strengthening manual processes that are more resistant to manipulation and enjoy a large degree of public trust and public understanding. Furthermore, as EDR becomes an increasingly visible and contentious tool for challenging election results, candidates and parties in multiple countries are employing a tactic of eroding public trust in the electoral process by insinuating fraud ahead of elections.

It is anticipated that the TEPJF will see an increasing number of cases regarding disinformation through social media, potentially generating jurisprudence that responds to this gap in the law. This puts the TEPJF in a potentially delicate position, as it is called upon to balance issues of electoral integrity with freedom of expression and freedom of commerce, while also remaining within its constitutional mandate.

Civil Society Engagement

Never in the history of Mexico have citizens had so much power in their hands to share information, organize social movements, and develop policy reform platforms that enhance accountability and deter the abuse of power. A clear pattern in Latin America is that while CSOs have enthusiasm and energy, they often lack the technical competence necessary to meaningfully advance policy reforms. This is especially true in Mexico, where there is increased apathy among youth and women, who are less likely to engage in politics and actively participate in electoral processes.

A challenge faced by the electoral bodies in Mexico will be to mobilize voters, in and outside of the country. There is a consistent decline of the participation rate including for presidential election (less than 60% of the electorate). As for the participation of the Mexicans living abroad (90% in the U.S.), more than 10 million have the right to vote, but it is anticipated that no more than 300,000 will do so.

Recommendations: Electoral Assistance in the Western Hemisphere

Proactive, targeted and sustained donor investment can promote free and fair political processes and help consolidate democratic norms. With further investments from international partners, Latin America can continue to strengthen political institutions, expand access, enhance transparency, and deepen credibility.

IFES recommends that the U.S. Congress, USAID, and other international donors commit to supporting the following areas, each of which strengthen credible political processes:

Robust Funding for Electoral Assistance

On behalf of IFES and the democracy and governance implementers community, we thank the Congress – and particularly this Subcommittee – for its continued support of DRG in even the most challenging budget environments. We ask that the U.S. Congress continue its support for robust levels of democracy assistance, and encourage you to leverage your oversight role in ensuring appropriated funds are obligated and spent.

Long-term Support Across the Electoral Cycle

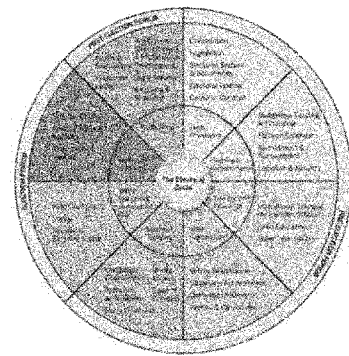


Figure 1. The Electoral Cycle, International IDEA (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance)

Election day is not an isolated event. The political processes and operational demands that both precede and follow an election are interdependent, and a failure or shortcoming at a single point may have significant repercussions at multiple stages of the cycle (see Figure 1). Moreover, if electoral shortcomings accumulate and cause citizens to lose faith in the credibility of the election results, broader development objectives may also suffer. It is paramount for international donors to recognize the value of full electoral cycle support in order to proactively invest resources in advance of elections and at sufficient levels to engage local partners in a consistent fashion – and with sufficient time to help them with their urgent and longer-term needs. This does not imply huge investments in many stable countries, but rather sustained capacity building, technical assistance, and accompaniment.

Peer-to-peer Exchanges

Recent elections, particularly in Honduras, have illustrated the urgent need for the promotion and exchange of international best electoral practices, particularly in the areas of cybersecurity, results transmission and EDR. The development of local expertise via peer-to-peer learning and exchanges promotes the independence of EMBs from internal and external influence. IFES recommends the implementation of USG programming to bring polling workers, civil society representatives, members of the judiciary, and others who participate in the organization and administration of an election in a foreign

country to the United States to study electoral procedures in the United States for educational purposes, and vice versa.

The regional and global networking among election professionals is one of the major ways in which elections transcend national borders. These associations or communities of practice place a high level of importance on the development of professional electoral officials with high integrity, a strong sense of public service, knowledge, and experience of electoral processes, and a commitment to democratic elections.

Promotion of Horizontal Cooperation

In the Western Hemisphere, IFES encourages south-south dialogue and collaboration between and among countries in the region to accelerate development, generate local solutions through collective action, contribute to sustainability, and help ensure regional stability. IFES has enjoyed a close working relationship with the INE (formerly IFE) since 1993 and currently holds active memorandum of understanding with both institutions allowing IFES to accompany the Mexican EMBs during the upcoming electoral process.

Empowering Civil Society to Foster Citizen Oversight of Electoral Processes

Civil society plays an important role in the electoral cycle – not only for carrying out civic and voter education activities, but also for holding governments and electoral institutions accountable. Through our work with CSOs, IFES empowers citizens to drive democratic change and socioeconomic development. Part of this process includes educating citizens about their rights and responsibilities in a democratic society, as well as the role of the government in service delivery across sectors. Elections in particular are an opportunity for citizens to engage in their political systems. Through civic and voter education, CSOs can reach women, youth, and other vulnerable populations to encourage informed participation in elections. To ensure that elected leaders are responsive to constituent needs, CSOs can work with citizens to make connections between political party platforms and their own priorities and create space for more constructive multi-stakeholder dialogues. With a stronger understanding of government planning and spending, citizens will also be better prepared to consolidate their priorities, mobilize around them, and advocate for greater government accountability to public interests.

Focus on Inclusion: Youth, Women, Persons with Disabilities and Indigenous Populations

Effective electoral assistance empowers traditionally marginalized groups such as youth, women, persons with disabilities, and indigenous persons to gain equal access to public institutions, win economic and political self-determination, and fully realize their individual rights. Inclusion and empowerment activities strengthen the credibility and stability of democracies more broadly, as democratic institutions flourish when all groups of society are represented.

IFES has a proven track record in the Western Hemisphere of empowering underrepresented groups to participate in the electoral process:

- **Haiti:** In 2016 and 2017, IFES promoted the secure and equal participation of women in national and local elections by engaging to prevent violence against women in elections (VAWIE). Actions

included conducting a targeted VAWIE assessment, raising awareness and offering resources to women candidates, including a call-in line and referral service for victims. IFES also provided a training for “Male Allies for Leadership Equality (MALE)” to raise awareness of gender-based violence (GBV) and build a network of allies to stand against GBV and worked with the electoral management body and the Ministry of Women Affairs on the development of a National Gender Strategy for 2015-2020.

- **Honduras:** In 2012 and 2013, IFES supported the Honduran electoral commission’s voter education efforts through the coordination of mobile voter education units and kiosks. IFES also partnered with eight CSOs whose activities empowered voters with information about the electoral process. These organizations worked at the community level, allowing IFES to reach marginalized, indigenous and Garifuna (Afro-descendant) communities, as well as youth. The voter education activities included town hall community meetings and fairs in Lenka and Chorti communities. Visual (pictorial) materials were also distributed to help voters with low literacy skills understand these processes.
- **Guatemala:** In 2011, Guatemalans went to the polls to elect the president and vice president, members of congress at the national and district levels, mayors, and representatives to the Central American Parliament. The TSE focused many of its efforts on increasing voter registration. IFES supported the TSE’s efforts to include marginalized populations such as youth, women, people with disabilities and indigenous populations by conducting targeted civic education campaigns. IFES ensured messaging reflected intersectional identities such as indigenous people with disabilities and young women. IFES also supported the TSE in developing inclusive poll worker training materials and for the first time ever, poll workers were trained on basic sign language so deaf voters felt more welcome at the polls. IFES supported an initiative to translate public service announcements encouraging people to register to vote into four of the main Mayan languages (Quiche, Quekchi, Mam and Laqchiquel) in the country. Similar efforts were replicated for the 2015 elections.
- **Dominican Republic:** Ahead of the 2012 presidential election in the Dominican Republic, IFES collaborated with the La Junta Central Electoral (JCE), political parties, local DPOs and election observation groups to encourage deeper engagement in political life by citizens with disabilities. This included training people with disabilities to serve as election observers and facilitating the development of a disability rights policy platform. These successful efforts have paved the way for a more nuanced approach to building the capacities of persons with disabilities who have been exceptionally marginalized from political processes, youth with disabilities, especially young women. IFES has recently been awarded a grant from USAID’s Disability Fund to implement the “Promoting Political Leadership of Youth with Disabilities” project. This initiative will cultivate the leadership talents of youth with disabilities to engage in the political process in leadership roles, such as election officials and candidates, as well as build the capacities of ADIDE, a network of local DPOs, to implement programs.

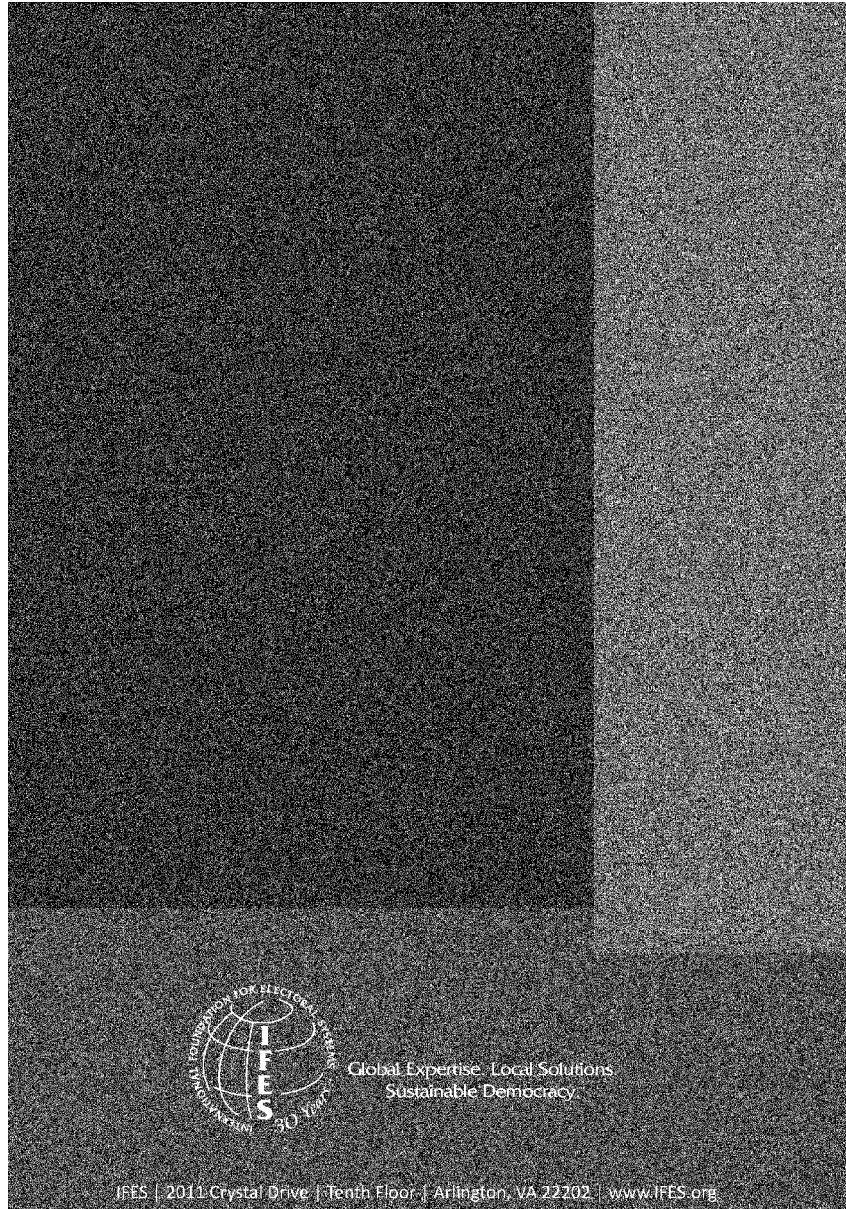
IFES recommends the continuation of similar USG programming, as well as electoral assistance that supports inclusive electoral laws and policies; prevention of and protection against violence against women in elections and politics; the equal opportunity recruitment and employment conditions for electoral administrators and poll workers as well as recruitment and resourcing for candidates; increased dialogue with DPOs and women-, youth- and indigenous-led CSOs; targeted voter outreach; safe and accessible polling stations, campaign trails and political workplaces; access for all persons to democratic processes (i.e., the necessary ID documents for voting); and leadership training. IFES recommends programs that proactively focus on inclusion of marginalized groups, with a focus on the ways that intersectional identities impact participation in political life.

Conclusion: Renewing Our Commitment to Latin American Democracy

The time is now to reinvest Latin American democracy. Although the 2018 super-cycle is critical, the United States should not turn away afterwards; we must work with our partners to assess lessons learned and next steps to strengthen institutions such as EMBs, regulatory bodies, the judiciary, parliament and civil society. The key to effective electoral assistance is sustained support to make electoral events more legitimate and responsive, rather than destabilizing and a flashpoint for violence.

Democratic governance is forever a work in progress. A renewed commitment to supporting the people of Latin America in their pursuit of credible, inclusive, transparent and responsive democracies will in turn support American interests at home and abroad.

Mr. Chairman, thank you again for this opportunity to testify. On behalf of IFES, we are honored to partner with the U.S. Government and Congress, international aid organizations, our CEPPS partners, and of course, the citizens of Latin America in support of a more democratic and prosperous region.



Mr. COOK. Thank you, sir.

Mr. Swigert, you are now recognized.

**STATEMENT OF MR. JIM SWIGERT, SENIOR ASSOCIATE AND
REGIONAL DIRECTOR, LATIN AMERICA AND CARIBBEAN
PROGRAMS, NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE**

Mr. SWIGERT. Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Sires, distinguished members of the subcommittee and committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee. Today, I want to highlight the stakes for the region and the United States of safeguarding the integrity of elections in Latin America's packed 2018 election season.

We often hear that sound elections are an essential but insufficient condition for democracy. Unquestionably that is true. The converse is also important: Bad elections are catalysts for instability. In 2018, as two of every three Latin Americans head to the poles, the resilience and stability of democracies across the hemisphere will be put to the test. While democratic advances are ongoing—Argentina, for example, is working to boost transparency and improve governance—public confidence in democratic institutions is in decline. Exposure of far-reaching corruption networks has angered publics and damaged trust in leaders and institutions. Political polarization is on the rise. As Chairman Cook said, the stakes are high. Upcoming elections are an opportunity to rebuild confidence and strengthen political legitimacy across the region. Failed elections would damage governance and set back hemispheric cooperation on solutions to shared challenges of economic growth, trade, drug trafficking, migration, and addressing the crisis in Venezuela.

This year's elections are likely to be contentious. As seen in questioning of many recent elections, challenges to electoral integrity, some familiar, some new, are becoming more pronounced in the region. Problems include efforts by some political leaders to curtail the independence of electoral authorities, twist rules to their favor, and use courts to restrict political participation, infusions of illegal political financing, including from narcotraffickers, and the growing use of disinformation along with hacking for political ends.

Democracy activists committed to safeguarding elections need to step up efforts to address these challenges. The United States and other regional and international actors can help by directing diplomatic support and resources to build national capacities both to conduct and monitor elections, and for international election observation, which can reinforce the efforts of the national actors.

NDI's experience has shown that both international and national election monitors have key roles to play. Nonpartisan citizen observers, active throughout the region, and leaders within the global movement to defend the integrity of elections build additional trust and credibility. They also underscore local ownership of electoral integrity issues.

Proven lines of action to safeguard elections include independent, statistically based monitoring of the election day processes and election results verification, commonly referred to as parallel vote tabulation, PVTs, or quick counts; international networks for solidarity and assistance to citizen election monitors; norms and stand-

ards for elections, like the open electoral data initiative that NDI helped to launch; youth-engagement programs; and building bridges between citizens and officials to prevent election related violence. Democratic elections are today the norm for the Americas, but a handful of exceptions exist, Cuba the most glaring one. Venezuela is another. There, a new Presidential election is constitutionally required this year. Under what conditions the election will take place, if at all, is uncertain. Given the way the Maduro regime has dismantled democracy and trampled on the rule of law, stepped-up international pressure for improved election conditions is essential if the Venezuelan people are going to have a say in determining their country's future. The United States should also not lose track of unresolved electoral integrity issues. In Central America, for nearly a decade, Nicaragua's electoral process has been characterized by opaqueness and deliberate restriction of political competition. The scope of irregularities in Honduras' recent flawed elections has cast a cloud over the legitimacy of the process and could generate serious instability if unaddressed. Steps are needed to enact a robust series of overdue electoral and political reforms.

International support for improved democratic governance should not stop after election day. Ongoing efforts to strengthen democratic institutions are needed so that legislatures, political parties, and governments can better address priorities of improved citizen security, economic growth, and reduced corruption. This serves the interest of countries in the region and ultimately the foreign policy of the United States.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my views with you today. I look forward to your comments and questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Swigert follows:]

Testimony from Jim Swigert
 Senior Associate and Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean Programs, National
 Democratic Institute
 House Committee on Foreign Affairs
 Upcoming Elections in the Western Hemisphere: Implications for U.S. Policy
 January 10, 2018

Mr. Chairman,

Thank you for the invitation to join my colleagues from the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) to appear before the Committee in this timely hearing on what the Economist magazine categorized correctly as Latin America's busy and vitally important 2018 election year. In Latin America and globally, IFES, IRI and NDI work in close partnership to support elections, and together lead the Consortium of Electoral and Political Processes (CEPPS), funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development to carry out democracy-strengthening programs around the world. I welcome the opportunity to share NDI's views on challenges related to Latin America's 2018 election season and approaches for strengthening election integrity and democratic governance that can advance the shared interests of citizens throughout the Americas in building a more stable, prosperous, inclusive and democratic hemisphere.

In 2018, nearly two of every three Latin Americans head to the polls. Competitive presidential elections are scheduled in Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, and Paraguay. El Salvador holds legislative and municipal elections in March, which will set the tone for next year's presidential polls, and will come under additional scrutiny following the serious irregularities in last year's Honduran elections. Presidential elections are also constitutionally required before the end of the year in Venezuela. Under what conditions presidential elections take place—if at all—will determine whether the Venezuelan people are given any voice in overcoming the country's debilitating crisis and autocratic rule. Elsewhere, Cuba's long farewell to the Castro brothers will enter a new phase this spring when Raul Castro hands off the presidency to a successor, while retaining his position as Secretary General of the Communist Party.

This year's elections in Latin America occur against a setting of palpable public anger over abuses of office by elected leaders—the result of multiple high profile corruption scandals that have swept across the region, enveloping current and recent presidents and whole generations of political leaders. Economic slowdown and persistent criminal violence have impacted negatively on the quality of life, as well as made it more difficult for governments to deliver on promises to improve the lives of citizens. Staggering revelations of deep-rooted corruption networks has stoked existing skepticism of politicians. Actions by leaders in several countries to override constitutional limits to extend a president's time in office have reinforced dissatisfaction and fueled political polarization. "Outsider" politics is on the rise. The prestige of traditional political parties has declined throughout the region. Nonetheless, positive signs of democratic renewal exist as well. New figures have emerged and established political leaders have sought to

rebrand themselves or found new independent political movements. Argentina stands out as a bright spot as President Mauricio Macri gradually puts in place transparency and governance improvements.

Voters in the region's three largest countries—Colombia, Mexico and Brazil—face pivotal decisions about their countries' future political direction. Sharp differences among likely candidates make Colombia's presidential election look a lot like a second referendum on the peace process, simultaneous with the stunning shift from the battlefield to politics by demobilized FARC guerrilla leaders set to stand for election to guaranteed legislative seats. In Mexico, where crime and corruption top voter preoccupations, anti-establishment candidate Manuel Lopez Obrador continues to lead the polls but it is still early to predict outcomes. In Brazil, many observers consider the October election the country's most consequential since its return to democracy in the 1980s given the political uncertainty and widespread rejection of established parties and leaders. President Temer's government has the highest disapproval rate ever recorded in his country—85 percent of Brazilians think his administration is “bad” or “terrible.”

Latin America's 2018 election season will be contentious. The legitimacy and integrity of elections in 2017 has repeatedly been questioned in the region, including in Bolivia, Ecuador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Venezuela. Citizen trust in elections also varies widely across the region, according to the 2016/2017 USAID-supported LAPOP (Latin American Public Opinion Project) Americas Barometer public opinion study. While relatively high in Costa Rica (57 percent of the population), trust in elections has fallen to less than a quarter of the population in the other countries who will elect new leaders in 2018—Colombia, Mexico and Brazil.

These elections will certainly impact the United States' interests and its ability to partner and reach agreements on policy priorities such as trade, migration and drug trafficking. They will also influence the hemisphere's response to the deepening crisis in Venezuela. As this process unfolds, both for the interests of the region and those of the United States, it will be important for the United States to support domestic and international efforts to safeguard and strengthen elections. This matters not just for reasons of principle and values, but also to be able to strengthen partnerships on policy issues such as cooperation on drug trafficking and migration issues.

When the electorate makes a free and informed choice among candidates who were given a fair chance to compete for votes, citizens have the opportunity to choose those who they believe will best improve living conditions—to “make democracy deliver.” They also establish public confidence in government, which helps to stabilize political systems and reduce conflict, and establish conditions for greater economic growth and opportunity. Support for democratic elections, therefore is both a matter of respect for the political rights of sovereign people and a matter of regional and international peace and stability. Both are vital to the interests of the American people and everyone around the world.

It is, therefore, important for the United States and the broader international community to promote electoral integrity by building domestic capacities and through international election observation, which complements and can reinforce the efforts of national actors. To ensure that elections can resolve peacefully the competition for office and accurately reflect the will of the people, at least three principles need to be reinforced in all electoral assistance.

- Inclusion: To be democratic, political systems and electoral processes must guarantee universal and equal suffrage for all citizens. Political systems must move beyond a winner-take-all mindset so the opposition gets a meaningful stake in building effective governance.
- Transparency: People have a right to genuine elections. Both citizens and candidates must be allowed to see for themselves that elections are credible. It also requires public access to both electoral processes and data for independent verification, and the political space necessary to publicize the findings of such verifications without fear of persecution.
- Accountability: For elections to be legitimate, accountability must be established at all levels—including in the administration of the process, the political playing field and the electoral justice systems so that candidates with grievances will see the advantages of going to the courts rather than sending supporters to the streets.

No electoral or political process can be perfect, but the degree that the principles of inclusion, transparency and accountability are present and strengthened reinforces the potential for sustained and positive democratic progress.

While actors who seek to subvert electoral integrity have adopted more advanced tactics in recent years, citizen election observation has proven to be an effective mechanism for promoting electoral integrity, broadening democratic accountability (including by exposing misconduct) and protecting political space for credible citizen-led initiatives. In the Americas and globally, nonpartisan citizen election observers have led an electoral integrity movement which has developed a flexible network for sharing expertise, support and advocacy skills on techniques for securing elections and fostering democratic governance.

Over the last 30 years, as NDI helped it spread from its roots in the Philippines in 1986 and Chile's 1988 plebiscite, national election observation has evolved from individual, ad-hoc mobilizations on election day into a movement of like-minded organizations representing over four million citizen monitors across the globe that employ systematic oversight methodologies which spans the entire electoral cycle. Today, 250 citizen election monitoring organizations and their regional networks belong to the Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors (GNDEM) with its Declaration of Global Principles and Code of Conduct. Latin America's groups along with their association, the Lima Accord (*Acuerdo de Lima*—which NDI helped to found), are central to that effort. These groups both examine and advocate around issues related to achieving inclusion (in electoral processes), transparency (needed to know if elections are genuine), and accountability (in the electoral context).

International election observation also has evolved, particularly for the organizations that endorse and collaborate in implementing the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation, including the UN Secretariat, the Organization of American States (OAS), the European Union (EU), NDI, IRI, the Carter Center and key intergovernmental and international nongovernmental organizations that operate in other regions. With a few notable exceptions—Venezuela, Nicaragua, and of course Cuba—governments and election authorities in the Americas have increasingly come to recognize the important role that independent, impartial election observers can play in strengthening citizen confidence in the integrity of elections. Governments now invite experienced, impartial organizations like the OAS and the EU to observe elections.

Continued United States support for both international election observation efforts and national election observation initiatives in Latin America is critical for sustaining these key instruments for protecting elections. NDI's experience has shown that non-partisan national election monitors complement rather than duplicate international election observation. They provide added value in building additional trust and credibility regarding election processes as well as underscoring local ownership of electoral integrity issues. Five effective lines of action to safeguard elections based on NDI programs are:

- Helping nonpartisan civil society organizations develop sustained efforts to systematically monitor electoral and related political processes. Independent statistically-based monitoring of election-day processes and election results verification—commonly referred to as “parallel vote tabulations, PVTs or Quick Counts”—decrease political volatility and the potential for violence by increasing public confidence in elections.
- Building cohorts of citizen election monitoring experts and networks of monitoring organizations across borders, regions and globally for solidarity and mutual assistance.
- Advancing norms and standards through networks of citizen election monitors, election administrators, and international observers and assistance providers, such as the Open Electoral Data Initiative, begun by NDI, as well as through intergovernmental organizations (including the UN, OAS, regional organizations, and Open Government Partnership).
- Facilitating youth engagement programs, including young women, with political parties, civil society groups, and other entities. These programs bring young people and their leaders into political and electoral processes in order to promote citizen-centered governance and peaceful political competition.
- Developing bridges between election monitors, peace-building groups and women's organizations with election commissions, political parties and public safety sectors. The goal is to improve cooperation and better prevent or mitigate the potential for election-related violence.

Building national capacities and mounting international election observation efforts has worked well to support electoral integrity in diverse settings around the world, even in unstable political conditions. For example, in Guatemala, IFES, IRI and NDI have worked together under a USAID-supported CEPPS program to support the 2015 elections during a tumultuous period of institutional unraveling. The discovery of a

widespread corruption network led to the resignation, indictment and detention of former President Otto Perez Molina and his vice president. It also implicated many in the political establishment. The crisis occurred alongside widespread street demonstrations and severe public questioning of the Congress and other institutions. Some Guatemalan civic leaders had sought postponement of the scheduled—and constitutionally required—general elections until after electoral reforms could be enacted. Others feared such an unconstitutional delay in elections could provoke an even deeper crisis.

As the situation unfolded, the OAS and the EU deployed robust international observation missions. With USAID support, IFES provided technical assistance to the Guatemalan electoral authorities, and NDI and IRI provided coordinated assistance to domestic election observers to monitor the quality of the election, conduct an election-day results verification (Quick Count) and track and deter political violence. The elections took place as planned, without serious irregularities or political violence, and all candidates accepted the official results.

When, on election night, first-round preliminary results pointed to the elimination of the candidate that pre-election polls had shown winning—someone with suspected ties to drug traffickers—Guatemalan electoral authorities credited the Quick Count supported by NDI with additional Swedish and Norwegian government backing, with helping to prevent disruption of the process. This candidate's party was later legally dissolved, drawing on information from citizen monitors which established gross violations of statutory limits on campaign expenditures. Following the election, in 2016 the Guatemalan Congress enacted a series of needed electoral and political reforms incorporating recommendations from Guatemalan civil society.

Looking ahead, several old and new challenges to electoral integrity in the hemisphere are of particular concern:

- Efforts by political leaders to curtail the independence of electoral authorities and adjust established rules of the game in their favor, including using courts to restrict political participation;
- Infusions of illegal political financing from narco-traffickers and other sources;
- The growing reach of disinformation—false or distorted information—spread through the Internet or other means in order to advance political goals; and
- Hacking for political espionage and even sabotage of electoral systems.

Election observers in cooperation with credible news media and electoral authorities need to continue to develop new techniques to respond more effectively to these challenges as well as improve collaboration.

In Mexico, cyber threats against political activists have become a growing concern. With the support of the National Endowment for Democracy, NDI plans to share international experiences for identifying, tracking and countering disinformation with Mexican civic partners early this spring as Mexico's campaign heats up. Civic groups from Brazil and Colombia will participate as well. NDI is also working with civic groups to monitor electoral and political violence in Mexico—a problem highlighted by the recent assassination of five politicians.

Conducting regular high quality candidate debates is another useful approach for promoting electoral integrity. By fostering discussions focused on issues rather than personalities, debates reduce risks of political violence even in today's polarized world. Institutionalizing the practice of regular, structured debates more broadly in the hemisphere may also help to address the new wave of "information disorder" challenges by fostering a better informed citizenry, which in turn can better hold elected officials accountable for their campaign promises. In 2017, with support from the Howard G. Buffett Foundation, NDI, together with regional partners from a consortium of debate sponsors from 32-countries, known as Debates International, which the Institute helped found, joined with the Mexican National Electoral Institute (INE, *Instituto Nacional Electoral*) to organize a forum on global best practices for conducting candidate debates. INE is responsible for conducting presidential debates prior to Mexico's July 1 elections.

We often hear that sound elections are an essential but insufficient condition for democracy, which is unquestionably true. The converse is also important; deficient or corrupt political dynamics are precursors of bad elections, which are catalysts for instability. Therefore U.S., international and regional engagement must not end after election day. Support for improved democratic governance following elections is a necessary investment to promote a more stable environment that serves the interests of countries in the region and ultimately U.S. foreign policy goals. Building strong democratic institutions promotes economic growth, foreign investment and a business climate conducive to U.S. exports. It reduces incentives for migration.

No program or policy offers a silver bullet for transforming weak political systems of governance or overcoming entrenched corruption. Three areas of engagement in Latin America that can strengthen core democratic institutions are:

- Legislative Reform Networks. As civil society co-chair with the Government of Chile of the Open Parliament Working Group formed under the auspices of the Open Government Partnership, NDI supports legislative exchanges across the hemisphere to develop transparency reforms. NDI has also provided in-country support for reform initiatives to legislatures in Argentina, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico and Paraguay. Together with IRL, NDI also assists the House Democracy Partnership's engagement with legislatures in Colombia, Guatemala, Haiti and Peru. In the Northern Triangle countries of Central America, NDI supports tripartite meetings with legislators to discuss legislative priorities on citizen security.
- Cross-Sectoral Communities of Practice on Public Policy Priorities. In Central America's Northern Triangle countries, NDI regularly brings together elected officials and political party and civic leaders to increase expertise on violence prevention and other citizen security issues. In Colombia, NDI has worked with victim's groups and elected leaders to promote greater participation in local development plans.
- Youth Leadership Development. In all its programs, NDI works to incorporate excluded and underrepresented groups into politics—particularly youth and women—to improve the quality of political participation. More than 2,000 Nicaraguans have received skills-training through the Institute's Political

Leadership academy. As a result, they have formed a network of democratic reformers working to bring about improvements in the lives of their communities.

As attention turns to the 2018 elections, it will be important for the United States and other international and regional actors committed to democratic norms not to lose track of unresolved electoral integrity issues from earlier years. Recent past elections underscore the challenges. In Honduras' disputed 2017 presidential election, both EU and OAS observer missions documented extensive irregularities and deficiencies—although they differed over the implications of these problems for the integrity of the final results. After such a seriously flawed election process, questions over political legitimacy will linger in Honduras and could generate new conflict, human rights abuses and serious governance challenges. At a minimum, steps are needed to enact a robust series of electoral and political reforms, as agreed to four and a half years ago by both President Hernandez and Salvador Nasralla, before they first faced off in the 2013 presidential election.

Since Nicaraguan citizen monitors documented fraud in 2008 municipal elections, subsequent Nicaraguan electoral process have been characterized by increased opaqueness and deliberate restriction of genuine political competition. While the presence of a small OAS election mission in Nicaragua during last year's municipal elections was a potentially positive step, it remains to be seen if their recommendations will lead to any meaningful change.

International pressure for improved election conditions for constitutionally-mandated presidential election in Venezuela is essential. Increasing sanctions, particularly those directed at the regime, appears to be the approach that will generate the most support in the hemisphere and in Europe. In pressing for positive change, care needs to be taken to place the responsibility for the country's descent into unconstitutional, non-democratic authoritarianism, hyperinflation and prolonged crisis where it lies—on Maduro and his cronies—and not be distracted by divisions within the beleaguered opposition.

Finally, a word on Cuba. It is well understood that competitive elections are non-existent there. But it is worth noting that the Cuban government has felt obliged to take extra measures to ensure that remains the case as Raul Castro prepares to hand off the presidency this spring. Nonetheless, some independent Cuban civic activists had expressed interest in standing as candidates at personal risk in local municipal elections held last year, the only direct elections that take place in Cuba in which candidates are supposed to be apolitical. Cuban state security undertook a concerted campaign to block individuals from independent civic groups from pursuing candidacies. The United States and other international actors should continue to press the Cuban government to abide by the Universal Declaration for Human Rights and to hold democratic elections. Past grassroots Cuban efforts, such as the Varela Project, which gathered more than 20,000 signatures calling for a referendum on holding free elections and further reforms and the current Cuba Decides (Cuba Decide) Initiative, underscore the demand by Cubans to enjoy the same freedom and democratic rights as others throughout the hemisphere.

In closing, while I have focused on today's challenges, we should not lose sight of the tremendous democratic advances which have made Latin America—according to the

Economist's most recent survey of the state of democracy—the most democratic part of the developing world. In a relatively short span of just a few decades, the hemisphere has evolved from a period in which military rule and military coups were commonplace to the point where governments in the Americas are chosen through genuine elections, with just a handful of exceptions. This underscores the tremendous potential the Western Hemisphere has for further advancing freedom, opportunity and prosperity as well as for deepening productive partnerships with the United States.

Mr. COOK. Thank you very much, sir.

I am going to forego my questions to the end. We have a number of members who are eager to ask questions, and I am going to ask mine at the end. So I hope they will remember my generosity and kindness. And I am going to turn it over to ranking member, Mr. Sires. You are recognized.

Mr. SIRES. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I hope you get to ask your question and we don't have to go and vote.

Thank you very much for your comments.

National Security Advisor McMaster said there is already evidence that Russia is meddling in the Mexican election set forth in July. What can the Mexican Government do to ensure the integrity of their election and prevent interference from foreign governments? To your knowledge, is there any government—is the U.S. Government engaging with the Mexican Government to convey some of the lessons we learned here? Just wondering if anybody—

Mr. SVETLIK. Thank you, Ranking Member Sires, for your question. As I mentioned in my oral remarks, Mexico is very lucky to have a very well-resourced and robust election administration and electoral tribunal to address the administration of the elections. My understanding of the comments that Security Advisor McMaster has made relating to the disinformation, the spread of information, not necessarily the intrusion of the election—the system of elections. Mexico votes with a paper ballot, and it creates an auditable paper trail for the elections. So there is little vulnerability to the type of intrusion that might be presented by a disinformation campaign.

Now the electoral authorities do monitor very closely, they have a public financing system for elections and monitor very closely the use of media by the political parties and candidates. And there is a special department within the National Electoral Institute to do that. To my knowledge, I don't have knowledge of the sharing of information, but I do think that is incumbent upon the United States to share its knowledge and experience to help Mexico defend itself.

Mr. SIRES. Would you say that Mexico has strongest has the election system in the Western Hemisphere?

Mr. SVETLIK. If not the strongest, one of the strongest. It has made tremendous strides over the past three decades since the reforms in the early 1990s, and it has a budget of \$1 billion and thousands of employees across the country that manage the centralized system.

Mr. SIRES. Now, since there is no chance of having a free and fair election in either Venezuela or Cuba, what can countries in the region and organizations like yours and civil organizations and civil societies do to try to help and improve the situation on the ground?

Mr. SWIGERT. Thank you, Congressman Sires, for that question.

I think we need to be clear: There are no elections taking place in Cuba. This is a completely different process. And I think organizations such as ours need to continue supporting very courageous democracy activists, independent civil society, Cubans who are seeking to connect with like-minded activists around the world, highlight the situation inside the island and get greater informa-

tion and skills on how to make the case for a democratic future inside Cuba. There are a number of initiatives that are underway.

With regard to Venezuela, I think that it is absolutely important to continue the support for the democratically elected national assembly and to highlight what are the conditions for these upcoming elections, if these elections take place at all. I think that international pressure and pressure from Europe, Latin America, as well as the United States, continued pressure from the OAS, highlighting the conditions and pressing for changes can help. Obviously, it is a decision of those inside Venezuela whether they want to participate in this process or not.

Mr. SIRES. What is the big stumbling block between the two opposition parties coming together in Venezuela?

Mr. SWIGERT. I think there is a debate that takes place all the time in authoritarian societies like Venezuela where they hold election processes that are unfair, under circumstances where there is no fair competition and possibility of outright fraud, as to whether to participate, whether this is an opportunity to mobilize supporters and highlight the deficiencies of the regime, and that debate continues today.

Mr. SIRES. Thank you.

Mr. COOK. Thank you very much.

Congresswoman Ros-Lehtinen.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you so much, Chairman Cook. And I want to point out that Mr. Eddy Acevedo is in the audience. He is our former staff director for our Middle East and North Africa Subcommittee. And he is now—listen to this fancy title—Deputy Assistant Administrator and Chief Legislative Strategist for the U.S. Agency for International Development. It started here, and it went all the way to the back. They couldn't get it all in there.

Welcome, Eddy.

Mr. Chairman, I wanted to ask the panelists about Colombia and the peace process and what will happen to the FARC. Will they run for office, et cetera. I have long been critical of aspects of the peace agreement with the terror group, FARC. And particularly I have opposed allowing FARC members to run for political office. But under the current agreement, the Colombian House and the Colombian Senate have guaranteed the FARC five seats in each Chamber and any of them can run for President. I believe that we have a moral obligation to the victims of the terror the FARC, and allowing the FARC to hold power in Colombia's Government before justice is served is just plain wrong. But whatever your views on that, it is already a done deal.

Is it possible do you think that the FARC could be using its illicit profits from its narcoterror activity to fund any electoral campaigns? Are you monitoring that? Have you heard of any problems? Are there any indications that the FARC could be using fear and intimidation tactics in order to undermine the democratic process to its advantage?

Ms. RIMKUNAS. Thank you very much for the question. In the conversations that we have had with local partners in some of these more rural areas and post-conflict zones, there is a fear that the FARC does have increased control and increased influence, whether it be monetary or just with fear over some of the electoral

processes, including the candidates. And while they themselves may not necessarily be running candidates under the FARC new party, they may be influencing some of the candidates running for office. And it is I think a fear that is shared among not just the local partners but others observing the election and something that we are looking closely. We don't have any official programming that is taking a look at that right now, although I think that is an excellent recommendation.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Well, thank you for putting it on your radar.

I wanted to ask about the double standard when it comes to the OAS. In Honduras, the secretary general took it upon himself to ask for new elections while its own electoral observation mission and the European Union mission did not come to the same conclusion. Conversely, in Nicaragua, the OES electoral observation mission stated, "The mission received 219 complaints that were forwarded to the Supreme Electoral Council." But the council is led by Roberto Rivas, who was just recently sanctioned by the U.S. for human right violations, for corruption, you name it. So, in Nicaragua, the OES is asking the inmates to run the asylum, but in Honduras, the secretary general is seeking new elections.

Do you share any concerns about this double standard, and how do we make sure that there is a more uniformed response at the OAS for these kinds of problems?

Mr. SWIGERT. Thank you, Congresswoman, for the question. I think the question of double standards has always come up with regard to international responses to elections. Election observation is a tough job, and it is not unusual that you might find some differences between European Union international observations and OAS international observation groups. I think the important thing is to press—to look at where we are right now—and to press for improvements in both countries. I think, as I pointed out in my testimony, there are serious deficiencies in the case of the electoral system in Nicaragua. And the irregularities that occurred in the Honduras election, about which both the OAS and EU agreed, were severe. So what to do? I think that there is a need to move forward on political and electoral reform. There are some proposals out there, for example from the conference of bishops inside Honduras, to convene a constituent assembly. President Hernandez has called for a dialogue. Clearly, steps have to be taken to remove this cloud over the election.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Thank you very much all of you.

And thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. COOK. Thank you very much. Thank you.

Congresswoman Torres, you are recognized.

Mrs. TORRES. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Building on some of the questions that have already been asked. I want to thank the panel for being here. I very much support your work and admire the work that you do internationally.

In regards to Honduras and the work there of the OAS, in my opinion, the State Department failed us miserably, head-in-the-sand type of attitude when they certified Honduras for U.S. assistance while they were in the middle of figuring out what to do with their election process. So, at this point, what is the U.S. policy in

supporting the OAS? I mean, do we continue to align ourselves with the work that they do, or do we not?

I have had an opportunity to meet personally with people that were on the ground and election observers. It is alarming to hear directly from them the processes that took place, how the computer systems went down, and how a very different candidate who was scheduled to lose came up winning after the computer system came back live and many other issues that they have identified. So I am curious to hear your opinion with your backgrounds as to, what do you think, where is our positioning with OAS?

Mr. SVETLIK. Thank you for your question. Speaking from my organization's perspective, we have enjoyed a very productive, collaborative relationship with the OAS and its observation efforts and its technical cooperation missions, as well. We are currently not active and have not been for the past couple of years in Honduras. So it is difficult for me to speak directly to that experience.

I do think, however, and I would say generally in response to the previous question about the U.S. observation efforts, they do provide a clear and concise document or documentation of what happened in the electoral process upon which organizations like ours can clearly address then the issues that others in the community, the domestic civic community—

Mrs. TORRES. What are the implications, though, for the OAS observation missions, in the upcoming elections, and obviously, we did not support them in their positioning of this election. What did we learn there?

Mr. SVETLIK. I think we learned, as was mentioned, how difficult the job of observation can be in terms of evaluating the election in real time. As you pointed out, the prolonged tabulation or vote count process or the interrupted vote count process was extremely problematic, and we live in a world where we are expected to get an immediate result, an immediate evaluation of the process, and making the job of election observation even more difficult.

Mrs. TORRES. Mr. Swigert, in your testimony, you note that one of the main concerns with elections in our hemisphere is illegal political financing from narcotraffickers. We talked about FARC in Colombia, for example. They mostly dealt in cash, and there hasn't really been a true accountability of how much cash they may still be hanging on to. So, aside from Colombia, what other countries in particular where this could be a problem, and is there anything that we can do to help those governments identify those types of problems?

Mr. SWIGERT. Thank you, Congresswoman, for the question. I think, unfortunately, there is a fairly extensive list of countries where this is a problem. It starts from Mexico and goes south. And I think any country that has been a country of production or transit is susceptible to this sort of corruption. It is most severe, in my experience, from what I have heard from partners on the ground, coming from all political perspectives at the local level. And the response has to be a response taken by the local government institutions, in the first case to pass legislation on political finance, to require candidates and officials to disclose what resources they are receiving and from where, and there are a variety of approaches that have been taken in the hemisphere.

We have been trying to work with political parties directly on trying to help exchange information on how to choose candidates because what we have found is party leaders themselves oppose illicit financing getting into politics.

Mrs. TORRES. Thank you. And I yield back.

Mr. COOK. Thank you very much.

At this time, I am going to recognize the gentleman, the Congressman from Florida again, what a surprise, Mr. Ted Yoho.

Mr. YOHO. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I appreciate it. I appreciate the panel being here. Let me see where to start.

Twelve elections in nine countries this year. Russia is really going to be busy. You know, I hope Putin is ready for that.

But, seriously, you know, the threat of challenging democracies—and as Gregory Meeks brought up, democracy is being challenged. And we believe in a certain type of democracy here, having a constitutional republic that goes through a democratic process to vote. We know the value of that. We have got a 200-plus year experience in that process. And we know that value. And it is more about the idealisms of America that we cherish so much and I think that a lot of the world wants. And when I look at what is going on in Latin America, from Mexico south, when I see what is changing down there—and as you, Mr. Svetlik, brought up, the citizens are losing confidence in the electoral process, for one thing. They are losing confidence in their governments due to corruption and the lack of the electoral process. Therefore, democracy as we experience in this country is dropping. You know, people are kind of confused, do they really want that.

And then I look at the amount of aid we have put in there with USAID—and I am glad Eddy is here with USAID—if you look at Mexico, there is \$59 million for good governance to combat corruption, for civil society; \$12 million in Colombia; \$4.8 million in Venezuela; \$11 million in Cuba. What is your experience on that money that we, as legislators, are spending of American taxpayers' money? What is the benefit of that that you see if we are seeing the slide kind of going down?

Let's start with you, Mr. Svetlik.

Mr. SVETLIK. Thank you for your question. The investments that are being made, we appreciate very much the funding that is made available through USAID to help us in engaging in these issues. The investments are, I think, important to make in part because of the cautionary word that my colleague made regarding bad elections and the backslide, further backsliding that can take place. We are, in many cases, facing some third generation issues in many of these countries that are difficult to solve, that require persistent and consistent attention, working to build systems that are responsive, giving citizens the information to address their issues, to address these issues themselves. But it is an effort that I think, over the long term, pays dividends. It is something that needs to be maintained.

Mr. YOHO. Ms. Rimkunas.

Ms. RIMKUNAS. Thank you for the question.

If I may, the support going to these countries is showing dividends. It is showing impact and results. And we hear that from,

and we see that from, our partners and the beneficiaries. One aspect I think that is feeding into this, into kind of the distrust and decrease in the belief of democracy, is really the dissatisfaction with the political establishment and weak political parties throughout the region. This is something that our funding hasn't necessarily been focused on over the last few years. We don't—at least I can speak from IRI and I know some other institutes—our political party work, which used to be our bread-and-butter work really has weakened, and it is very, very minimal in the region. And this, I think, to a certain degree, speaks to the weaknesses of political parties throughout the region and distrust in them.

Mr. YOHO. Well, and that is the important thing about a system that has a democracy because that is the only way a civil society can change politics. If we go the other way—and there are so many places that have sham democracies. You know, I chair the Asia and the Pacific Subcommittee on Foreign Affairs. And we look at Cambodia. This country has invested \$1.7 billion in good governance. But, yet, when you have somebody like the leader of Cambodia or Venezuela that outlaws your political opponents and then says we are going to have free and fair elections, it is not working. So is there something else we should focus on from our country to bolster the outcome of these elections? Not interfere, but bolster the alliance with that country to boost the confidence of the citizens and make a strong relationship with America?

Ms. RIMKUNAS. Sure. I think a lot of the issues that are going to be at the forefront of a lot of the voters' minds for the elections are longstanding issues that are present long before elections and will be present long after elections. And these are some of the areas where our assistance would be good to focus on. Particularly, as I discussed, and I think all of us see, some of the governance.

Mr. YOHO. I am out of time. You hear that rapping? So I appreciate your time.

Mr. Chairman, thank you.

Mr. COOK. Thank you very much.

I would like to recognize the Congresswoman from Illinois, Ms. Kelly.

Ms. KELLY. Thank you, Chairman Cook and Ranking Member Sires. Thank you to the witnesses.

I wanted to know, what affect do you think the renegotiations of NAFTA are having on the Presidential election in Mexico? Anybody?

Mr. SWIGERT. Well, I might start. I haven't been following the campaign on a day-to-day basis, Congresswoman, but I think economic issues are very much on everyone's mind. Corruption is another top issue, along with the question of insecurity. But I think the focus has been more internal, in all the reports I have read about the campaign to date, that relations with the United States loom large in Mexico, but people are focusing on politics at home at this stage.

Ms. RIMKUNAS. And I would also add that, at this point—and it is still fairly early, we are starting the pre-electoral period—NAFTA itself is not particularly at the forefront of voters' minds. But, as my colleague said, the economy, the U.S. relations with Mexico, corruption, those are the major issues that are really, at

this moment, driving the election. Now, there is still plenty of time. And I am sure that, you know, that will change as the elections are closer.

Mr. SVETLIK. From a different perspective, our institutional relationship with Mexican authorities is strong, continues to be strong. There has been no impact.

Ms. KELLY. And what about any conversation about the wall? Does that come up at all? Or is that worrisome to anybody?

Ms. RIMKUNAS. I can speak of our conversations with our partners. Again, the focus is on those major issues. And that is really what voters are looking to.

Ms. KELLY. Okay.

The other question is about transparency. You know, my colleague talked about the money USAID has given to Mexico. And it looks like we want to lessen that amount of money. But there have been complaints about fairness. And we have Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador has complained about election irregularities in his losses. So, you know, what can we do to help with election certification, or is there anything that we can do to help in that arena?

Mr. SVETLIK. Thank you for that question. I recently, this summer, attended a conference in Mexico City on electoral integrity in which the Foreign Minister made a very strong invitation for increased electoral observation and involvement of election organizations such as ours. And I think, while the elections are only 7 months away, it would be timely for there to be funding available so that we could engage in those activities.

Ms. RIMKUNAS. And in our conversations with the INE, the National Electoral Institute, they have requested, again, international observation missions as well as post-election support to enhance legitimacy. One thing that they have also mentioned during our conversations is their concern with disinformation. And this goes back to the question that you had, Congressman Sires, about the disinformation in Mexico. They are concerned about some of the disinformation that occurred around the 2017 gubernatorial elections where there was a lot of publicity out in YouTube via videos and so forth trying to discredit their PREP system, which is INE's fast count and vote tendency system which, you know, some candidates used as a talking point. So they are looking to strengthen the trust from citizens in the process.

They also shared with us that they have detected some hacker attacks from foreign servers. They did not share from where. So I can't confirm at this point from where that is. And they have also detected that some of these videos that went viral went viral through a coordinated system of foreign servers like an attack. But, again, no information was shared as to where that came from.

Ms. KELLY. Thank you.

Mr. SWIGERT. Just to add, very quickly, that this concern over disinformation also exists in Brazil, and we have been consulting with the Mexican electoral authorities on bringing civic groups from Brazil together with Mexicans to talk about how they could track and deter and counter any disinformation. The concern is not just external. It may be internal sources as well.

Ms. KELLY. Thank you very much.

And I yield back.

Mr. COOK. Thank you very much.

At this time, I would like to recognize Congressman Rooney from Florida.

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Florida. Wow.

Mr. COOK. What a surprise, Florida, once again.

Mr. ROONEY. Thank you, Chairman Cook.

I would like to ask a couple of questions about the FARC deal, maybe Ms. Rimkunas, a little bit, start with that, if anyone else wants to comment. You know, it is not off to a very good start with the hectare buying program having the unpredictable consequence of generating an increase in coca production, which is affecting Panama and a lot of other Central American countries. So my concern about the FARC deal is the granting of political power without them having to earn it. Now we have Timochenko in the election. And I have been thinking a lot about what happened with the FMLN. And you all are really smart, smarter than me. I would like to be interested in if you think that is a reasonable analogy to be worried about given where we are with Sanchez Ceren right now having given the FMLN power many years ago.

Ms. RIMKUNAS. The test for the FARC will be—and this is where these elections, especially the congressional elections, will be really important to watch, as to whether they can reach those ten seats on their own. They are guaranteed 10 seats, 5 in the House and 5 in the Senate. That doesn't mean that they are going to reach them on their own, meaning that they are going to get enough votes to get those seats. So, regardless of the amount of votes that they get, they will be given those seats. But, again, it will be—

Mr. ROONEY. That is the problem.

Ms. RIMKUNAS. Correct. But, again, it will be a test to see whether they have that base of support. And, again, through the 2026 elections, whether that base continues to support.

At this time, the overwhelming majority of Colombians do not have a favorable view of the FARC and don't support their transition into a political party. So, again, I think that that is something that we will continue to watch.

Mr. ROONEY. Any other comments?

Mr. SWIGERT. Congressman, I would add that, going back to a point that was raised earlier about a concern of the victims inside Colombia, the victims of conflict, there are new transitional districts that have been set up that will allow citizens' groups and victims' groups to elect Members of the Congress under the terms of the peace agreement. I think that is an area to keep an eye on. It provides an opportunity, an opportunity to increase the voice of those who have been abused under this conflict. And it is an area where we and IRI have looked for ways to help improve the voices of the victims in the political system.

Mr. ROONEY. If I might, one more, the last minute or 2 here, is I remember working on the AMLO situation in 2006 with your boss, Dan Fisk, who is a great guy—and please tell him hello—and I just wonder if any of you all would like to offer any kind of comment on what the high potential right now, or certainly potential, of AMLO winning in Mexico might bring to the United States-Mexico relationship?

Ms. RIMKUNAS. Well, AMLO is certainly leading in the polls right now, though I would say that polling has been uncertain in the region. So, again, there is a lot of time left before the elections and a lot of things still to be decided in terms of the candidates running.

Right now, as you are all aware, AMLO has become much more moderate. He has become much more centrist, in terms of the economy, he wants to keep things moving. He wants to keep the Central Bank at the forefront of that. So he is trying not to alarm not just his domestic audience but also his international audience and really has distanced himself from his previous friends in the region and really tried to play it straight.

So it is a question, that we are looking at closely is exactly if he does win, where his positions would, at the end of the day—

Mr. ROONEY. Yeah. Which AMLO is going to show up after he wins?

Ms. RIMKUNAS. Yeah. At this time, I don't think we can be certain of that.

Mr. ROONEY. Okay. Well, thank you very much. I yield.

Mr. COOK. Thank you very much.

I will now recognize Congressman Meeks from New York.

Mr. MEEKS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Also, let me just start by just saying to Ms. Rimkunas, I left out the great work that IRI does in complement to—I mentioned NDI—and Mr. Svetlik. I really appreciate your testimony because you do magnificent work in trying to help promote democracy. And I feel that we are challenged right now. And here is what we are trying to convey in my opening statement. Institutions—and that is what you are trying to help create—because that is the bedrock of democracy. Without institutions that are working and operating, then we cannot have democracy. And when I think of Latin America, especially back in the eighties, when we just had military coup after military coup, with no institutions, and thereby the voice of everyday people not getting to be heard. You know, and from my background, being here in the United States, I can remember stories of my dad talking about him not having the ability to vote. He had to count how many jelly beans was in a jar, in a democracy, in the United States of America that we still—but it is a work in progress.

So we have progressed past the discriminations and preventing individuals. We have improved our judicial institutions because it was our Supreme Court that, in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, that said separate but equal was the law of the land. Those institutions and how we put people in place, and we are trying, in our democratic societies, to be a more perfect union and to become better. But these democracies—even ours is being challenged today—whether it is by cybersecurity, as Russia is doing in Latin America. They have done it here in the United States, doing it in Europe, trying to undermine our institutions. And what your organizations do is trying to strengthen our institutions. And I thank you for it because that is how we preserve democracy and give those who have no voice a voice.

I could not be prouder of the people of Venezuela who are standing up and demanding that their voices are heard. It reminds me

of people in the streets of New York and other places when we did the same. And what you are doing—and we do all need to call out when they are trying to—the government, to keep people and those voices from being heard. I would really hope that the opposition leaders come together because that hurts when the opposition is fighting one another and not coming together to try to make sure that there is real voices by all of the people, which I see is lacking to a degree. But what you are doing in trying to help and strengthen institutions in Venezuela and other places is what is important, as opposed to saying we are just not going to do anything.

So my question, then, is—because I do believe in multilateral cooperation. And the only multilateral organization that I know that is working is the OAS right now. And they have a louder voice. What can we do to protect the—you know, to help OAS? And what role can they play in strengthening democratic elections and democratic institutions? How can we get, you know, those—I think one of my colleagues talked about how Peru and Colombia and Argentina now are doing better. How can we get them also to work in a collaborative way with us where those places—where those institutions are backsliding, those that are working, so we can work collectively to making changes and making a difference so we can have institutions and have democracy continue and not go back to the eighties where you have coup d'état after coup d'état? Anyone?

Mr. SWIGERT. If I might respond very quickly, Congressman. I think multilateral initiatives and multilateral institutions are very helpful at this moment. The OAS is one, strong support for the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights is critical, and there are other groups that are active throughout the region.

On Venezuela, there are homegrown initiatives. There is the Lima Group of many governments that has stepped forward and to be strong voices in support of democracy in Venezuela. So I think it behooves the United States to find ways to support that process.

When it comes to some of the other challenges that democracy faces, I think we need to bear in mind, as you said, this is a moment, and democracy is a process. And it is a process, as I hear from friends in the region, that has its ups and downs. But there is no better process.

I think, when it comes to the case of Brazil, we need to bear in mind that the corruption scandals are moving forward because of the strengths of judicial institutions. And that is necessarily a consequence of one of the pillars of democracy. So I think we have to look for ways to strengthen institutions, as you say.

Ms. RIMKUNAS. And, if I may, long-term support for these democratic institutions is crucial beyond the elections. I think citizens see democracy and government work at the local level with their mayors, with their city councils. That is where they can feel it. That is where they can touch it, especially those that are outside of the capital. Especially in countries like Colombia, there are still a lot of populations out in the rural areas that don't necessarily and are not connected with their central government. And so, when they hear about the scandals and the issues happening, reinforcing these institutions at the local level is vital. Thank you.

Mr. COOK. Thank you very much. I feel like I am back in a classroom again.

Speaking of that, in grad school, I always remember they used to quote Bismarck. And I think they were talking about making laws and policies—of all people, Bismarck, right? If you know your history. And there will be a test after this hearing. And he said it was—and it is almost analogous to this. Democracy, it is like watching people make sausage. It is not a very pretty process. And I am paraphrasing, probably incorrectly.

But this hearing here, we are talking about a very, very difficult subject. It is one which I personally think we, as a country, have ignored, Latin America in particular, and for a variety of reasons. And I think some of these things that have happened in the past we can be a much better neighbor. I am not talking about being a big brother or a big sister but somebody—an equal partner instead of having that arrogance when dealing with some of these countries. But that is my personal opinion.

Just one other final piece of business. I am not going to bore you. But I do support the decision to recognize President Fernandez in Honduras. I hope that they will implement the recommendations of the OAS and the EU.

And one of the things I have been talking about, we want to see the lessons learned. Hopefully, in the spring, we would like to—I am going to be soliciting for people that want to go to Honduras, and some of the other countries, maybe Guatemala down there. But if we go to Honduras, the only pre-qualifier is there will be a test, and you have got to spell Tegucigalpa correctly. I know you are all capable.

So, anyway, once again, I want to thank the panel for your patience. We had a lot of people, a good turnout, everything else. And with everything that was going on, I am glad we got this done because of votes. And you know how crazy it is. So, once again, thank you for your expertise and your patience in dealing with us. And, with that, there being no further business——

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. No other Floridians?

Mr. COOK. No, there are seven or eight or nine of them left. This subcommittee is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 3:26 p.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING NOTICE
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6128

Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere
Paul Cook (CA-08), Chairman

TO: MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

You are respectfully requested to attend an OPEN hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, to be held by the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere in Room 2172 of the Rayburn House Office Building (and available live on the Committee website at <http://www.ForeignAffairs.house.gov>):

DATE: Wednesday, January 10, 2018

TIME: 2:00 p.m.

SUBJECT: Upcoming Elections in the Western Hemisphere: Implications for U.S. Policy


WITNESSES: Ms. Katya Rimkunas
Deputy Director
Latin America and the Caribbean
International Republican Institute

Mr. Michael Svetlik
Vice President of Programs
International Foundation for Electoral Systems

Mr. Jim Swigert
Senior Associate and Regional Director
Latin America and Caribbean Programs
National Democratic Institute

By Direction of the Chairman

The Committee on Foreign Affairs seeks to make its facilities accessible to persons with disabilities. If you are in need of special accommodations, please call 202/225-5021 at least four business days in advance of the event, whenever practicable. Questions with regard to special accommodations in general (including availability of Committee materials in alternative formats and assistive listening devices) may be directed to the Committee.



COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

MINUTES OF SUBCOMMITTEE ON Western Hemisphere HEARINGDay Wednesday Date 1/10/18 Room 2172Starting Time 2:00pm Ending Time 3:26pmRecesses n/a (to) (to) (to) (to) (to) (to)

Presiding Member(s)

Chairman Cook

Check all of the following that apply:

Open Session ☒Electronically Recorded (taped) ☒Executive (closed) Session ☐Stenographic Record ☒Televised ☒

TITLE OF HEARING:

"Upcoming Elections in the Western Hemisphere: Implications for U.S. Policy"

SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

Rep. Ros-Lehtinen, Rep. DeSantis, Rep. Rooney, Rep. Yoho, Rep. Sires, Rep. Kelly, Rep. Torres, Rep. Meeks

NON-SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT: (Mark with an * if they are not members of full committee.)

HEARING WITNESSES: Same as meeting notice attached? Yes ☒ No ☐

(If "no", please list below and include title, agency, department, or organization.)

STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD: (List any statements submitted for the record.)

Chairman Cook QFR's

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE _____

or

TIME ADJOURNED 3:26
Subcommittee Staff Associate

Questions for the Record

WHEM Subcommittee Hearing: "Upcoming Elections in the Western Hemisphere: Implications for U.S. Policy"

January 10, 2018 at 2:00 p.m. in Rayburn Room 2172

Chairman Paul Cook

TO: ALL WITNESSES

- I. Diminishing Confidence in Democracy: This year's elections are taking place during a time when the public appears to have lost confidence in the benefits of a democratic system of government. There is also growing anger at traditional politicians for their inability to curb corruption and fight crime. An Americas Barometer poll says support for democracy in the region has fallen from 66.4 percent two years ago to 57.8 percent today. Only 49.4 percent of Mexicans and 52.4 percent of Brazilians believe that democracy is the best political system. Further, the poll also shows that nearly 38 percent of Latin Americans would support a coup d'état if that helped fight crime and corruption.
 - How can the U.S. and other democratic-minded countries work to promote faith in democracy on both diplomatic and technical levels?
 - How might a rise in leftist populism affect the U.S.'s efforts to promote democracy and governance in the region?

Katya Rimkun: Citizen faith in the democratic system has been at times linked to how well that system and those governing it can address their most pressing issues. If their political parties, elected officials, and governments can effectively represent them and solve their problems, then citizens tend to feel like their democratic system is working for them. The issue of corruption has also drastically affected citizens' perception of democracy. Corruption undermines citizens' confidence in their government and democracy. At the technical level, the U.S. and other democratic-minded countries can work to promote faith in democracy by supporting programs and efforts that strengthen political parties and effective local governance, and work to decrease corruption. The International Republican Institute's (IRI) programs especially focus on supporting accountability and citizen engagement at the municipal level, where citizens have greatest contact with their public servants. At the diplomatic level, exchange of information and best practices between governments on issues like corruption is also helpful. For example, the House Democracy Partnership (HDP), which works directly with partner countries around the world to support the development of effective, independent, and responsive legislative institutions, conducts peer-to-peer exchange programs and other activities where best practices and lessons learned are shared on a particular issue. Support such as this is impactful for counterparts in the region.

While the region saw a rise in leftist populism in the early 2000s, the current scenario is less a fight of left versus right ideologies, but rather an increasing confrontation between the political establishment and popular extremists. The latter actors have used and continue to abuse democratic institutions and systems to get to power (through elections), control power (through legislatures, courts, etc.), and remain in power (through constitutional manipulation, etc.). It is the misuse of these democratic principles, institutions, and processes that hamper U.S. efforts to promote democracy and good governance. U.S. diplomatic interventions must call out fake democracy wherever it finds them, and its assistance programs should include governance components in nascent or fragile democracies so that we can support our democratic friends in showing citizens that democracy goes deeper than elections.

Michael Svetlik: In terms of diplomatic efforts, the U.S. Congress, Administration, and our allies can promote faith in democracy by unequivocally denouncing efforts to erode fundamental democratic norms. For example, we thank Chairman Cook for his December 21 statement on the Honduran elections, which expressed disappointment in irregularities, but called for all parties to seek relief through established election dispute mechanisms. Populism is a direct result of growing mistrust of democratic institutions – democracy only works if the people believe it's working. The populism that blossomed in South America's Andean region in the last decade has lost ground, and populist regimes are becoming less attractive by the day, since they fail to fulfil their promises and commitments. Technically speaking, the U.S. must support electoral institutions' efforts to build trust through increased transparency, accountability and responsiveness. Targeted, long-term support to election management bodies should build capacity to address transparency in budgeting and in procurement; professional communication (particularly via social media); clear and accessible voter education; smooth results tabulation and transmission; and election dispute resolution.

Jim Swigert: Working in partnership with like-minded countries bilaterally and in multilateral forums, such as the Organization of American States coupled with vocal U.S. support in defense of democratic values, can help promote faith in democracy in the Americas. U.S. leadership can play a decisive role in strengthening democratic institutions and advancing initiatives to improve governance, especially in addressing the problems of crime and corruption. The April Summit of the Americas on Democratic Governance Against Corruption offers an opportunity to reinvigorate efforts to improve accountability and fight corruption. To be effective, diplomatic initiatives to bolster the capacity of democratic institutions to fight corruption and impunity need to be backed up with concrete programs to increase government transparency and accountability. Populist leaders who seek to dismantle democratic safeguards, such as checks and balances provided by an independent judiciary and a free press, represent a threat to U.S. efforts to promote democracy and good governance in the region and, ultimately, political stability and economic prosperity. Whether of the left or of the right, authoritarian populism undermines the rule of law and puts individual liberty and freedom at risk. While populist leaders may initially have some degree of popular support, when their popularity eventually subsides history shows that political instability follows, jeopardizing investment and trade and putting other U.S. national interests at risk.

2. **U.S. Foreign Assistance:** What type of assistance should the U.S. and other democratically-minded countries consider providing to strengthen and support government institutions throughout the region? How effective is U.S. foreign assistance supporting democracy and institution-strengthening given polling data revealing decreasing public support for democracy in the region?

Katya Rimkunas: U.S. foreign assistance supporting democracy and institution-strengthening has been effective, but more is needed. Given current conditions and issues undermining democracy in the region, including the potential rise in popular extremists, there are a few areas the U.S. and other democratically-minded countries can provide:

- 1) Support democratic governance and renewal of political parties. Effective and strong political parties can work to prevent the rise in popular extremists, but only if they have citizen trust and support. Democratic governance is key to ensure member inputs into policies and campaign platforms. That's how parties come to stand for something and gain voter trust. Political parties throughout the region are weak and have failed to play their preventative role. Even historically strong parties like Mexico's PRI and PAN have been weakened and their constituent bases, which were once vast and strong, have now shrunk. Political parties need to appeal to a changing population. Attracting and electing new, younger leadership that represents citizen interests is fundamental.
- 2) Support for strong and effective local governments. Citizens, especially those outside capital cities, feel closest to their governments and the democratic system through their local governments. They

rate the success of government, and by association their democratic system, partially by how effective their local government is at responding to their needs. Citizen confidence in these local government institutions is critical for a strong, sustainable democracy. Support for best practices in citizen outreach, service delivery, transparency, and inclusion can help strengthen governance at this fundamental level. However, the region's countries have hundreds to thousands of municipalities. So this work needs to be done on a larger scale than in the past, and focus on supporting associations that can continue this support beyond U.S. assistance.

- 3) Support for strong civil society. Civil society continues to play a crucial role in ensuring there are checks and balances. Where there is a strong, organized, and vocal civil society, populist extremists have a harder time consolidating power.

Michael Svetlik: It is paramount for international donors to recognize the value of full electoral cycle support in order to proactively invest resources in advance of elections and at sufficient levels to engage local partners in a consistent fashion – and with sufficient time to help them with their urgent and longer-term needs. This does not imply huge investments in many stable countries, but rather sustained capacity building, technical assistance, and accompaniment. U.S. foreign assistance supporting democracy and institution-strengthening has been extremely effective – the fact that Latin America is facing increasingly complex and nuanced challenges is a direct reflection of the sophistication of its electoral systems. Electoral democracy has been consolidated in many countries; regular elections are the norm, with few exceptions (most glaringly, Venezuela); and countries such as Panama have even graduated from election assistance. Such Latin American countries as Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Uruguay now provide foreign assistance to other countries. This means our Latin American partners are stronger allies, and USG assistance can now be more targeted and impactful.

Jim Swigert: Weak state institutions and low levels of political participation are challenges for improving the responsiveness of government and delivering good governance. Polling data that shows a drop in support for democracy is troubling. Any poll is a snapshot, in this case emblematic of current public dissatisfaction with the track record of elected governments across the region in fighting crime and corruption, delivering economic opportunity and reducing inequality. As I said in my prepared testimony, we should not be discouraged or lose sight of the tremendous democratic advances in Latin America. In a relatively short span of a few decades, the region has evolved from a period in which military rule and military coups were commonplace to the point where governments in the Americas are chosen through genuine elections with just a handful of exceptions. U.S. foreign assistance has contributed to this evolution and prevented democratic backsliding in many cases.

Democracy assistance is a cost-effective way to promote foreign policy goals of the United States and like-minded democracies in the region. No short-term fix or single development template exists for consolidating democratic institutions. However, sustained and targeted efforts by the U.S. and other democratically-minded countries can help to increase government transparency and accountability and strengthen and increase the resilience of democratic institutions. Taking into account the threats that corruption, criminal networks and populist leaders represent for effective governance and democratic institutions, foreign assistance programs should prioritize: (1) strengthening the independence and capacity of national legal systems, prosecutors and judiciary; (2) assistance to institutions such as legislatures that provide oversight and promote government transparency; (3) support for civil society watchdog groups and networks of reform-minded political and civic leaders; and (4) investing in youth engagement and participation programs so that young people better contribute and benefit from development of their countries.

3. Lessons Learned from 2017 Honduran Elections: The recent election in Honduras demonstrated the importance of having a credible and transparent electoral system that citizens can trust. Should we

expect any of the same issues experienced in the November 2017 Honduran election in other countries who will hold elections in the region this year?

Katya Rimkunas: The issues that arose in the November 2017 Honduran elections have raised flags in neighboring countries that are concerned with citizen trust in their electoral systems and processes. In Mexico, the country's National Electoral Institute (INE) has requested assistance to increase legitimacy around their upcoming elections. Specifically, the INE needs assistance with combating disinformation; international observation missions to enhance the legitimacy of the results; and post-election support to enhance legitimacy. In El Salvador, the last two elections were hotly-contested and fraught with allegations of electoral irregularities and fraud, fueling tensions between political parties and within society. Unsurprisingly, a majority of Salvadorans have little-to-no confidence in their electoral institutions, which could pose a major problem in their upcoming local and legislative elections, and important 2019 presidential elections. Support for the country's electoral tribunal, civil society organizations supporting electoral monitoring and greater civic engagement in the process is needed from now through next year's presidential elections. In elections, transparency is everything. And that's what U.S. support should aim for.

Michael Svetlik: Honduras left the democratic community with very important lessons. It is a reminder that democracy is not a finite journey, but a continuous effort with many possible pitfalls. Given issues with results tabulation and transmission in Honduras and other countries (for example, Kenya), election management bodies can expect a renewed focus on transparent, timely result tabulation and transmission. "Elections to watch" include the upcoming presidential elections in neighboring El Salvador, and in Guatemala in 2019.

Jim Swigert: The crisis of political legitimacy in Honduras that erupted around the November 2017 election has its origin in earlier events: most notably, the renewed controversy over presidential reelection that under different political circumstances prompted a coup in 2009 and the failure to enact political and electoral reforms called for by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Political polarization is intense, with polls showing a majority of Hondurans opposed to presidential reelection prior to elections last November. Allegations of corruption and a widespread perception of political bias contributed to extremely low levels of citizen confidence in the Honduran electoral authorities. In 2017, the scale of irregularities reported by international observer missions from the Organization of American States (OAS) and the European Union – combined with a lack of communication by the electoral tribunal about the preliminary results especially during the tabulation process – contributed to a perception of a poorly managed election that was less than fully transparent; this perception was substantially greater than in 2013, when Honduran electoral authorities had also demonstrated significant administrative shortcomings.

While this same combustible mix is not present elsewhere among those holding elections in 2018, political polarization and reduced citizen confidence in electoral authorities and trust in elections is evident in several countries, notably Brazil, Mexico and El Salvador. In the case of a close election, legal mechanisms for resolving disputes are likely to come under stress and losing candidates may reject the legitimacy of results—as Mexican presidential candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador did in 2006. The most recent elections in El Salvador (2015 legislative and 2014 presidential) were bitterly contested, with the OAS international election observer mission playing an important role in mitigating conflict around the second round presidential election. Colombia's legislative and presidential elections will offer different challenges, given the participation in the electoral process of the demobilized FARC guerrillas under the terms of the recent peace agreement and long standing concerns over electoral-related violence and declining levels of political participation, especially by youth. Venezuela presents a unique situation, as the presidential election scheduled for April by the unconstitutional National Constituent Assembly will take place under conditions that are neither free, fair nor transparent.

4. Electoral Observation Missions: In which of the elections taking place in the region in 2018 do you think the international or domestic observations will be most necessary? Why?

Katya Rimkunas: First, it is important to note that domestic long-term observation is more effective than day-of observation. First, more can be seen in the run-up to the election. And, second, local capacity to monitor is enhanced. Wherever domestic long-term monitoring can be supported, it should be done. That said, there are three elections in which international or domestic observations will be helpful. First, Mexico's elections will mark a number of firsts for Mexico: the first time independent candidates unaffiliated with a political party are permitted run for president; the first time all political parties have formed electoral coalitions; the first time the 2014 constitutional electoral reforms will be tested; and the first time Mexicans abroad will be able to vote for their governors and mayors. This coupled with a history of electoral violence and 2017 gubernatorial elections where the country's National Electoral Institute (INE) saw an uptick in disinformation campaigns trying to discredit their work increases the need for electoral observation. The INE has requested assistance with combating disinformation; international observation missions to enhance the legitimacy of the results; and post-election support to enhance legitimacy. Mexico's Special Prosecutor for the Attention of Electoral Crimes (FEPADE), one of the institutions that helps with the federal electoral process, has also requested international assistance with electoral observation. In El Salvador, the last two elections were hotly-contested and fraught with allegations of electoral irregularities and fraud, fueling tensions between political parties and within society. A majority of Salvadorans have little-to-no confidence in their electoral institutions, which could pose a major problem in their upcoming local and legislative elections, and important 2019 presidential elections. There are current efforts to support domestic observation for the 2018 local and legislative elections, but nothing yet for the very important 2019 presidential elections, which will need civil society organizations supporting electoral monitoring and greater civic engagement in the process, and international observation.

Michael Svetlik: Mexico's July 2018 elections will be unprecedented in their magnitude and significance, and would benefit from observation. Mexico will hold presidential, legislative, senatorial, gubernatorial (in nine states) elections, and elect the Head of Government of the Capital. Given this complexity, electoral democracy in Mexico is both an example of progress made to date and of work that remains to be done to improve the capacity and performance of electoral bodies, to strengthen citizen voices, and to mobilize voters.

Jim Swigert: Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador and Mexico.

- Brazil: Reduced Brazilian confidence in elections, popular revulsion toward the political class and traditional political parties, controversy over the likely disqualification of former President Lula Silva as a candidate and the absence of a clear front-runner portend a volatile and unpredictable election. For the first time, Brazil has invited the OAS to send international election observers. The presence of an OAS observation mission will provide a respected external neutral actor to offer an objective assessment of the conduct of the electoral process, which can help reduce tension and buttress the electoral system. In past elections, Brazilians have not raised serious questions regarding the administration of the elections and the results from Brazil's electronic voting system have been readily accepted by losing candidates and their supporters. To the best of my knowledge, Brazilian domestic election observer groups have concentrated on analysis and advocacy for electoral reform and to date have not established the structures or networks necessary to deploy a nationwide election day citizen observation.
- Colombia: Colombian elections face particular challenges because of decades of guerrilla warfare and violence from narco-traffickers and other criminal networks, coupled this year with the first participation in elections of demobilized FARC guerrillas. The presence of both international and domestic election observers will be important to provide neutral, objective information on any incidents

of electoral violence and irregularities and violations of electoral law. A package of electoral and political reforms was developed by an independent group of electoral experts, as stipulated under the peace agreement, but recommended reforms were not adopted. The OAS and the European Union have sent international observer missions before and are expected to do so again, although no official decision on their presence has been taken. Colombia has capable domestic election observer organizations that will monitor and bring attention to issues of concern throughout the election process.

- El Salvador: Recent legislative and presidential elections have generated considerable controversy. While electoral reforms were subsequently implemented, Salvadoran political and civic leaders have expressed concern about the capacity of the electoral authorities to carry these out effectively and predict disputes are likely to emerge in the March 2018 legislative elections. The presence of OAS international observers will again be important for ensuring the presence of a neutral party respected by all sides with proven technical capacity to provide objective information about the process. With support from the U.S., civic groups in El Salvador are mounting domestic election observer networks for the legislative elections. Additional assistance is necessary following the legislative elections to enable Salvadoran domestic observers to prepare for the potentially even more conflictive presidential election in February 2019. To decrease political volatility and the potential for violence, it will be important for domestic observers to conduct an independent statistically-based monitoring of election day voting and counting processes and election results verification – commonly referred to as “parallel vote tabulations (PVTs)” or “Quick Counts,” which acts to deter fraud and increase public confidence in elections as warranted.
- Mexico: The 2018 elections are expected to be contentious. Although the capacity of Mexican electoral authorities to conduct transparent elections is well established and recognized throughout the region, the confidence of Mexican citizens in elections has declined. Both international and domestic observers will be important to provide information from non-partisan sources regarding electoral conditions and potential conflicts and disputes. The presence of OAS international observers, who have monitored past Mexican elections, would ensure the presence of a neutral party respected by all sides with proven technical capacity to provide objective information about the process. Mexico, like other countries, is facing new challenges of political disinformation and misinformation. Mexican civic groups are focused on these and other issues of politically motivated cyber-attacks. Working in tandem with Mexico’s electoral authority, the Institute for National Elections (*Instituto Nacional Electoral*), NDI will bring together civic groups in Mexico to examine means for tracking and countering disinformation as Mexico’s campaign heats up. NDI also has partnered with Mexican domestic observer organizations to monitor and seek to mitigate electoral violence, with a special focus on political violence against women.

TO: MS. RIMKUNAS AND MR. SWIGERT

1. Role of Independent Media in Elections: In countries like Cuba and Venezuela, independent media is severely constrained. Dissidents and opposition candidates are also restricted from getting their messages out to the public. In other countries in the region, members of the media have faced the wrath of government figures or criminal groups for exposing information.
 - What is the role of independent media in elections in the region and what are the negative consequences that restricted or partisan media have on the credibility of elections?
 - How do you see social media and the expansion of the internet affecting the upcoming elections in the region? How does it impact democracy and governance more generally?

Katya Rimkunas: Transparency is essential to free and fair elections, and independent media play a crucial role in scrutinizing elections, from monitoring campaign spending, rhetoric, attempts to buy votes, outright fraud, to combatting disinformation campaigns that could increase citizen distrust in their electoral systems.

Independent media are also able to promote healthy public debate surrounding elections, as well as monitor the integrity and transparency of the electoral periods and processes. If media is restricted or partisan, then they can negatively impact perceptions and behavior surrounding elections and candidates to benefit those controlling it. Social media and the expansion of the internet has the potential to significantly impact perceptions surrounding electoral processes and voter behavior. While social media can be used as an impactful tool to get citizens more involved and educated in their electoral processes and with their candidates, it also can be used to disseminate information that is not readily fact-checked or is purposefully false, and which in turn can erode citizen trust in their democratic system and processes. Candidates, campaigns, and voters must all be aware of this.

Jim Swigert: Access to non-partisan reporting is critical so that voters can make informed choices among candidates in elections. Support for independent media is especially important where governments shut off or restrict access to mass media by those with different or critical views, such as Venezuela. The role of independent media is also key to inform the public in countries where those in power seek to dominate public discussion through state-run media and other methods. To highlight efforts at partisan manipulation and mitigate such challenges, NDI and like-minded organizations, when possible, support efforts by domestic election observers to document and publicize such abuses in violation of electoral laws. As a result, voters are equipped to make more informed decisions, and civic and political leaders can call for real time action on violations and develop evidence to push for effective implementation of existing laws or reforms.

The internet and social media have made it more difficult for repressive governments to restrict the public's access to information and to opposing views. However, the explosion of social media has created new challenges for democracy as disinformation can easily be spread by foreign actors such as Russia, other governments and domestic political actors, or even by criminal organizations, in efforts to influence or disrupt democratic politics. Disinformation in politics, particularly elections, represents a critical threat to democracy. It spreads cynicism, distorts political processes and interferes with citizens' ability to make sound political decisions. At a time when the political identities of young people are increasingly formed on social media, the confluence of big data, artificial intelligence, computational propaganda and political bots are making mass manipulation of public opinion more effective and insidious. To address these challenges, NDI has launched **INFO/tegrity**, a global initiative to draw on experts and front-line practitioners from politics, civil society, academia, journalism, social media, technology and government to scale up responses to disinformation in its democracy and governance programming. As elections approach in Colombia and Mexico, NDI is sharing tools in both these countries to detect and disrupt disinformation with journalists, bloggers, civic activists and political parties.

2. Transition in Cuba: How would you describe the understanding of free and fair elections among average Cuban citizens?

Katya Rimkunas: It is difficult to truly gauge the understanding of free and fair elections among average Cubans without strong data. What we have observed is that Cubans are generally aware that their elections are neither free nor fair. The 2017 local elections, in which more than 12,500 positions were up for grabs, took place without allowing a single opposition candidate to compete. Local elections are the only electoral process in which Cubans have a direct vote, but candidates are restricted to those approved by the regime, and citizens know that. Of the almost 30,000 candidates, 175 linked to a dissident movement were nominated, and all were disqualified under specious pretexts before Election Day.

Jim Swigert: Decades of Castro family authoritarian rule have meant that average Cubans have had no opportunities to directly take part in fair and transparent elections. Therefore, they have little experience with such processes. The lack of a free media has also greatly limited access to independent information about elections. To the extent Cubans have awareness of elections, it would be related to the functioning

of the non-democratic Cuban system, which does not allow for real political competition and actively restricts participation by independent candidates. In this respect, with the exception of some committed independent civic activists trying to open political space against difficult odds, Cubans are generally unaware even of the rules for this closed system.

3. Venezuela Elections: Venezuela is scheduled to hold presidential elections in an uncertain and volatile political and social context. President Maduro disqualified the country's main opposition parties from participating, and today, the opposition coalition MUD is split among various factions. In this context, is there any value to U.S. democracy programming in Venezuela? If so, what specifically would be most useful ahead of this year's election?

Katya Rimkunas: There is undeniable value to U.S. democracy programming in Venezuela. The country's democratic actors continue to fight against an oppressive narcostate, but do so with resolve and a belief that they can overcome obstacles thrown in their way and find a democratic solution to their country's crisis. The U.S.' continued and long-term support in Venezuela is crucial to giving them confidence in their fight. To date, the Maduro government has not given any indications that the country's presidential elections, set to take place before the end of April, will be any different than the last two elections. In these, the government made it clear how far it was willing to go to secure an electoral win: including the consolidation, closing, and late move of electoral precincts to confuse and discourage voters; manipulation of votes; and the use and abuse of government resources and benefits to essentially hold votes hostage. These techniques, in addition to an electoral council packed with government cronies, and government control over the media and persistent disinformation campaign, leaves little chance for a legitimate, free and fair electoral process, and discourages eligible voters from participating. Coordinated international pressure on the Maduro government to at a minimum roll back all of the structural obstacles it has put into place for the elections, including changing the electoral council to provide for balanced representation of the opposition and allow for domestic and international electoral observations would be useful ahead of the elections. Also, a coordinated and unified message from the United States, Latin American countries and Europe on consequences to the Venezuelan government should it proceed with unfair, manipulated elections, is essential. Beyond the elections, there is a growing humanitarian crisis facing the country that will need support from the international community. IRI is attentive to how our specialties and access can contribute to the U.S.' contributions to assist this matter.

Jim Swigert: The repeated violations of Venezuela's constitution to curtail the authority of the democratically elected National Assembly, politically motivated arrests, arbitrary disqualification of candidates and abuses of power by electoral authorities, underscore the lengths that President Maduro and his circle have gone to avoid facing the judgement of Venezuelan voters concerning their responsibility for the country's terrible economic and human rights crisis. Despite repression, courageous Venezuelan civic and political activists continue to speak out and demand free elections to open the way to reverse the country's economic collapse and restore democracy. International criticism and pressure directed against the Maduro regime continue to grow as awareness of the government's abuses grows.

U.S. democracy programming helps to sustain the ability of Venezuelan activists to peacefully resist the government's deepening authoritarianism and to advocate for peaceful change. Useful points for engagement ahead of the elections include: solidarity with the National Assembly against the unlawful decisions of the unconstitutional Constituent Assembly; increased visits to Venezuela by respected human rights and democracy defenders; and active support to link Venezuelan democracy activists, civic groups, grassroots leaders and journalists with regional and global networks, to enable them to tell the truth to Venezuelans and to the world about the record of the Maduro government and the undemocratic conditions in which these elections are likely to be held.

TO: MR. SVETLIK

1. Electoral Systems & Processes: What are the primary challenges with electoral systems and processes in Latin America and the Caribbean? What have been the most effective and responsive ways of addressing these issues and who are the local actors that are most effective in implementing this type of support?

Michael Svetlik: A primary challenge to electoral systems and processes in Latin America and the Caribbean is outdated or limited legislation that is tailored to favor the political status quo, and does not take into consideration citizen demand for accountability and transparency. There are few mechanisms to punish those who violate election law, providing an incentive for external actors to attempt to influence election authorities. A second challenge is the lack of division between judicial and administrative electoral responsibilities; best practice is to have separate entities for each of these duties. A single institution that both administers elections and handles judicial challenges can be overwhelmed and more easily manipulated, ultimately undermining both efforts. An example of effective, efficient separation of these powers is Mexico's National Electoral Institute and the Federal Electoral Court of the Judicial Authority of Mexico. Lastly, most of the region's electoral authorities require urgent modernizations. Some have advanced significantly, like Panama's Electoral Tribunal or Brazil's Supreme Electoral Tribunal. These advances are notable in the areas of: optimization of resources and personnel, out of country voting, voter information, inclusion and accessibility, biometric voter registration, electronic and on-line voting, among others. IFES has worked since 2010 to address urgent changes in the electoral legislation in Guatemala, working not only with the electoral authority, but also with local civil society organizations (who are the voices demanding change). Some changes were made back in 2016 and now we are currently supporting another set of reforms leading up to the 2019 General Elections.

2. Previous Regional Elections: In 2017, Argentina held legislative midterm elections and Ecuador, Chile and Honduras held presidential and legislative elections. Are there any processes or best practices that can be replicated? Which aspects should be avoided?

Michael Svetlik: Honduras took the world by surprise. The electoral authority – which is led by three appointed magistrates – has previously adhered to the law, with exceptional performance during the 2009 coup and the following elections. Unfortunately, in 2017, we saw a setback, largely due to political influence and blunt and direct pressure by the Executive to the electoral authority. The President was seeking reelection at any cost, as evidenced by his efforts to change the Constitutional ban on presidential re-elections. The role of the international observation, in particular the OAS Mission, was important to documenting irregularities. However, the Mission's conduct in the election lead-up - with two Mission Heads, one friendlier toward the incumbent party (former President of Bolivia Jorge Quiroga) and the other towards the opposition (former President of Guatemala Alvaro Colom) – raised doubts and showed weakness. Since it came to life in 1989, Chile has been and continues to be an exemplary democracy. Chile's elections showed that political coalitions and alliances are key to victory, and that non-immediate reelection can work, as long as voters can identify with the candidate seeking another term. In terms of the elections management, it continues to be solid and has left no doubts of its impartiality and efficiency when conducting an election.

